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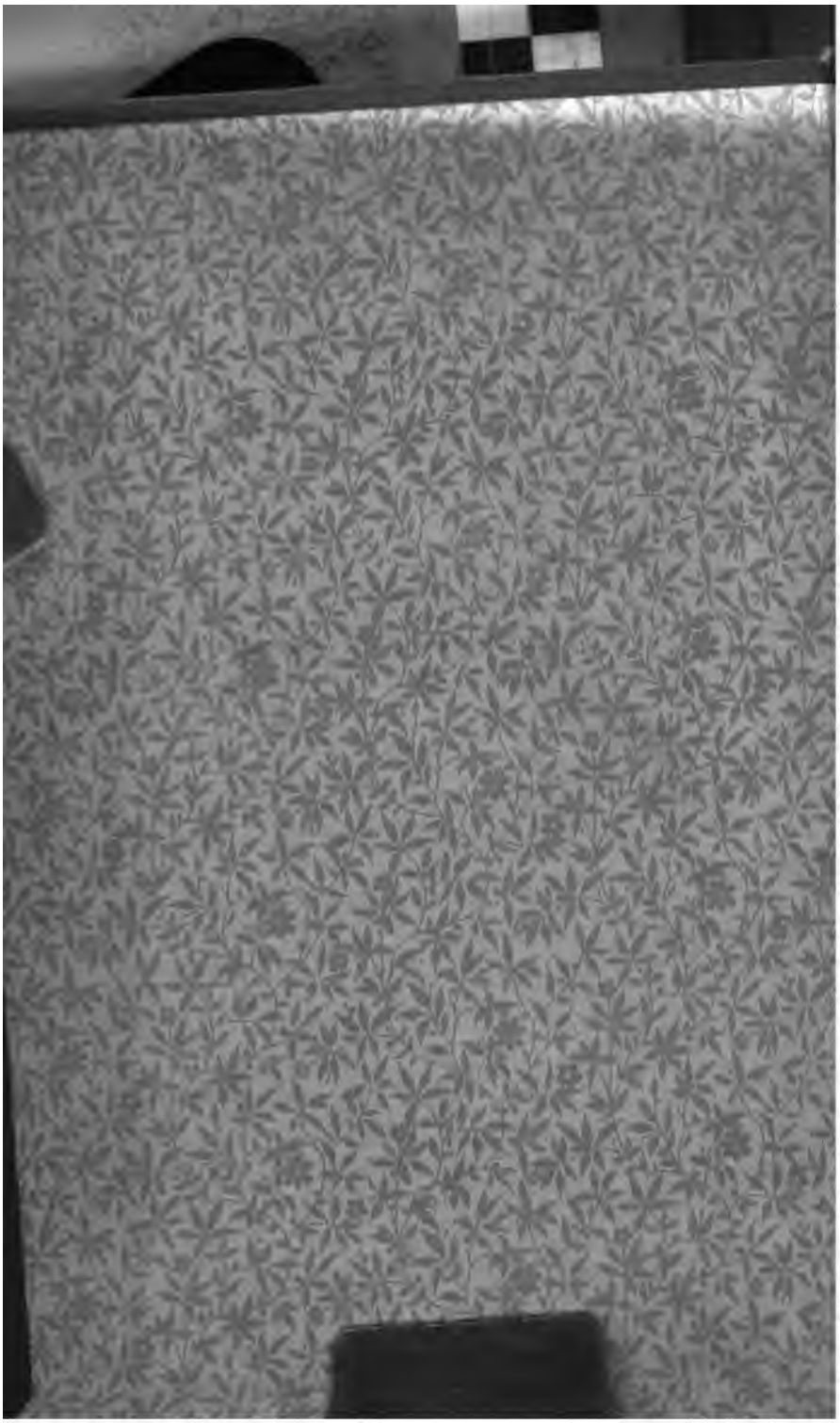

THE TWO ALTHEAS

"Thank you, Mr. Valender, it is all your doing."—*p* 81.

THE TWO ALTHEAS

A Home Chronicle

BY

EDITH E. HORSMAN

Author of "Severn-side," &c.

"True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home"

WORDSWORTH

"We may build more splendid habitations,
Fill our rooms with painting and with sculpture,
But we cannot
Buy with gold the old associations"

LONGFELLOW

ILLUSTRATED BY G. DEMAIN HAMMOND

LONDON

JARROLD & SONS, 10 & 11, WARWICK LANE, E.C.

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1896

AK28318

TO MY FATHER.

E. E. H.

PREFACE.

HOUSES are built, but homes are planted and *grow*.

The earliest home on record was a garden, and true homes are gardens still. They are not made of brick and stone, but of living, growing, vital things that, like the flowers, depend on Heaven's influences and man's fostering care.

Such gardens of the heart are to be found in unexpected places; for Love is hopeful, and utilizes what it finds—quite ordinary men and women of everyday life, sometimes. And sacred and lovely associations may cling about a house even in a dull, common street.

Will you care to penetrate such a one?

For all I can promise on behalf of this plain little dwelling is that it is a true home.

E. E. H.

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THE TWO ALTHEAS.

CHAPTER I.

STRIKING ROOT.

"By the fireside tragedies are acted,
In whose scenes appear two actors only,
Wife and husband,
And above them God, the sole spectator."

LONGFELLOW.

"What is really momentous and all-important with us is the present, by which the future is shaped and coloured."—WHITTIER (*The Better Land*).

WHICH way shall we go, dear reader?

Pausing idly, as we do, at the cross streets of the quaint old town, thinking each way looks pleasant enough this bright May afternoon, and that it does not matter much which we take, say, shall it be this or that?

Down the narrow, irregular old street before us, built without the least architectural design, and every house unlike its neighbour, but with a peep beyond of river and gentle uplands, leading gradually outwards to a lovely horizon of blue hills, that take a darker, dreamier blue, these glorious spring days?

Or shall we turn away from the sleepy street towards the churchyard? It is only a few paces away—much *too* few for the sanitary ideas of the present day; but, then, Harington churchyard is hundreds of years old, and when its first dead were laid to rest there, any fears of their immediate neighbourhood

would have been the superstitious ones of ghost and wraith, and not the least of unhealthy exhalations. So, as we are afraid of neither just now, let us take that way. The faint sweet odour of the flowery horse-chestnut reaches us even here; and now, slowly and solemnly peal out the chimes of the neighbouring church. It needed but this to give us that strange, pensive pleasure, that is next door to pain, when eye, and ear, and olfactory organs are all irresistibly appealed to; and we wonder, when all is fair and sweet, why we are half sad.

What is there in that blue sky above, with its soft veil of fleecy cloud, but an image of hope and gladness? Or in that winding river, upon which the sun is sparkling with a thousand dimples? Or in that line of distant hills, half in sunlight, half in deep blue shadow of afternoon? And here, close to us—if the mossy gravestones suggest serious thoughts of the time when we, too, shall no longer see the light—even the very graves are touched tenderly by hovering sunbeams, as if the glad young spirit of spring would summon all to rejoice with her. Beautiful! yes, beautiful indeed! And we pace the broad pavement of the avenue, and gaze up into the gnarled branches of the elms, where the sunbeams seem to be at play with the fresh young leaves and happy birds—and wonder again why we sigh, and why the very beauty is half oppressive. And as the chimes cease, we become aware of other music; for from the shadowy church is stealing out the grand refrain, "I know that my Redeemer liveth!" and, somehow, it comes like an answer to the unspoken question that has puzzled us this glad afternoon.

If we cannot forget all the gloom of winter, and rejoice, like the birds, in the bright present—if May beauty cannot hide from us that it, too, is transitory, and that all is passing—the message of those clear, flute-like notes from the organ is one of balm. It points to a future we still dare to believe in, when memory will not be touched with pain, and when the shadows will not steal over human lives.

I am going into the church awhile, dear reader. I know the organist, and it is not his music alone that interests me, though his pleasure in it is infectious. If you are tired of it and me, go your way, and leave me here in the cool church with my friend.

He is not a genius, though he thinks he is; but his joy in his music is as great as if he were a Handel or a Mozart. He lingers over their masterpieces with a loving, reverent touch, and as the grey walls re-echo the sublime choruses of the "Twelfth Mass," or the softly-dropping notes of the "Benedictus," the thin wiry figure of the music-master seems to expand at the sound. So we forget that his coat is rather seamy and worn, and that he is getting bald; and in the deep shadow of the organ chamber, the dark and still handsome face might be that of an Italian genius, over whom the divine art has cast its wondrous spell.

The "Benedictus" seems to have suggested another train of thought to the music-master's mind, for now the peaceful strain has passed into one of joy and triumph; and suddenly every corner of the wide building is awakening to the echo of Mendelssohn's "Wedding March." Ah me! what crashing chords—what tender lingering on suggestive passages—what grand exultant peals break forth again—till the organist sees the whole in imagination before him, and as he stops at last and turns round, he is almost surprised not to see the fair bride leaving the church on her husband's arm, with her bridesmaids behind her; nor to catch, through the open door, the glimpses of white horses and wedding favours.

Nothing of all this in reality; only the empty church, with two or three stragglers peeping in at the door, and the little blower gasping and wiping the beads from his face. The organist came back to the present now, and remarked good-humouredly—

"Why, you look warm, youngster!"

"Not over-cool work, that last, sir, I'd have you know," was

the reply, in a slightly injured tone, as the boy continued to wipe his forehead diligently. "I only hope that's the finish for to-day, for I have not got a dry thread about me."

"Now, now!" laughed the organist, "I know what *that* means, well enough! So I suppose you have been thinking of your threepenny bit all this time, instead of listening to the glorious music. And I shouldn't wonder if you never knew that was the 'Wedding March' I played just now."

He pinched the lad's cheek playfully as he spoke, for he was in good spirits this afternoon. However tired and discouraged he was when he entered the church, an hour with his beloved organ always restored him; and to-day there seemed an unusual hilarity in his face as he pushed in the stops and closed the instrument with a loving hand. But we live in different worlds though side by side, and Tim Trueman's world just now was his silver piece, and his cup of tea, and he was in no mood to stand parleying longer.

"How should I know?" he retorted, sullenly. "My arms that ached, I didn't think of nothing at all but getting through."

"And don't *my* arms ache, think you?" retorted the master. "But, bless the boy, we mustn't mind making our arms ache in such a cause! Here's summer upon us, Tim; the time for weddings and all the rest of it, and it would never do to be taken unawares." And with a curious twinkle in his eyes as he gave the boy his coveted coin, he was turning away; but Tim stopped short suddenly, and it was his turn now to look wise.

"Ah—h!" he said with a long breath, "I remember now—Miss Annesley! And are we going to play the 'Wedding March' for *her*, sir? All right, I'm your man; and so you leave my arms on at the end, I won't mind how hard you draw it out."

"Miss Annesley! chut, chut, I said weddings in general—anybody's wedding. I did not mention names. Now then,

be off, lad, and get your tea; and mind you don't forget choir practice to-morrow night." And closing the heavy door behind him, and swinging the keys as he trudged briskly down the avenue, the organist set off in his turn for home.

Poor little man! People often spoke of him so, though he was by no means short, but slightly above the medium height; neither was there any lack of manliness in the face under the broad wide-awake. I think it was because, in spite of his fifty years, he had so much of the boy about him still, and that he could never see himself as others saw him—a poor, toiling, striving music-master, with a small share of talent and a very shabby coat. To himself he was ever a genius—handicapped, it is true, for want of funds, but consoled and comforted in many a disappointment by the "divine art," as he loved to call it, that kept him fresh and hopeful where many others had found their fortune and lost their youth. I suppose illusion is part of that ignorance which is bliss. Anyway, the organist's illusions had oftentimes strewn his path with the bright flowers of hope; and if, more often than not, they faded before he could gather them, those blessed illusions still served him a good turn, and kept him from growing sour and dispirited in the battle of life. None of his day-dreams had come true. In his youth his ambition had been to go to Germany and study in the Schools, and become a great professor of music; or to write a famous opera that should bring him name and fame. At fifty no one knew him as "professor" but in his own home, where his wife had, half in girlish glee, half in loving irony, christened him thus years ago.

Of course he was to be rich. Genius affects to despise wealth as a lower good, but an establishment was one of the most substantial of the "professor's" visions—that, and the social status he was to take in right of his talent and success. To do him justice, he cared little for these two latter benefits for himself; but he felt he owed them to the young wife whom he had clandestinely won from a far different position in life,

and whose family had never forgiven him the outrage. But no establishment had come as yet, for no opera had been achieved, and the commonplace little house to which the "professor" had brought his wife twenty-three years ago was little changed since then. Yet there was something under that modest roof that made it in every sense a *home*, and prevented the first fire of youthful passion from expiring in its own ashes. For this young graft of the old stock of the Wyntons was sound as well as sweet, and gifted with a bright, brave, wholesome nature that any man, having won, would be rich. She was too young at nineteen to know all that she was casting aside; and if she ever awoke to realize it, she kept the secret tightly locked in her own breast.

It was a romantic story. The sunny schoolgirl at Miss Horton's boarding-school, just fulfilling her last term; the music-master's weekly visits to the prim drawing-room, where the lessons took place under the eye of the elderly principal; the glances that *will* shoot fire into the hearts of youth, even under Minerva's very nose; the lessons at the old church, where the young attendant teacher was sometimes bribed or persuaded to withdraw into the avenue "for a few precious minutes;" the eager talks and plans for the future, until the "professor's" entreaties and prayers had gained their point, and the daring schoolgirl had effected her escape from thraldom, and flitted away for better or for worse.

What guilty children they had felt when the deed was done, and Miss Horton's messengers had arrived just too late, and, between laughing and crying, the young bride had displayed her wedding-ring as her only answer! It was so delicious to be her own mistress—she who had all her life been fettered by other wills! For Althea Wynton and her sister Eva had been left as babies to the charge of their half-sisters, nearly twenty years their seniors, and their high spirits had often smarted under the rigid discipline enforced at Elm-leigh; and now that Eva had married Major Annesley two years ago, and had gone

away to India, what would life be worth for the younger girl henceforth at home?

So Althea had not thought much about her "professor's" family, or whether he would be likely to find as much favour at Elm-leigh as Major Annesley had done. His eyes were eloquent enough for her; and as he warmed with his theme, and asked her if she could be brave enough to endure privation for a few years, while he studied hard in Germany, or "somewhere"—to make for himself and her a name which even the Wyntons would be glad to own—her spirit leaped as high as his own, and her fate was settled.

So they came back from their runaway wedding too young and daring to be afraid or ashamed; and for the present—just till they could see their way to the German studies—took up their abode, like two callow birds, in the shabby house in Castle Street. How proud the young wife was at first to turn in at her door when and how she liked—she who had never left Miss Horton's portico without a procession of young ladies and their attendant teachers! And if it was different to the stately retirement of Elm-leigh, with its ancient trees, the enthusiastic love of the young husband made ample amends.

Miss Horton's awful brow at Harington Church the following Sunday was difficult to meet, it is true; even the pleasure of displaying her freedom and her new golden treasure before the eyes of her late companions in restraint, hardly made up to the warm-hearted girl for the stoniness of that averted gaze. And when, after long waiting for a reply to her impassioned appeal to the sisters at home, a short, cold letter arrived, forbidding her ever again to think of Elm-leigh as a home, the heart of the girl-wife failed her for once, and she broke into such tears as she had never shed before. It was just the testing-time that comes, I suppose, in all wedded lives. An occasion, not necessarily momentous in itself, but rather in its issues—when the veil is lifted for the first time, and we see our Paradise is not

rainproof, and when it rests with either husband or wife to supply the mental calibre necessary to meet the first strain.

In the first shock of this disappointment (for Althea had written repeatedly, and had still hoped against hope till this cruel letter came) she turned instinctively to her husband for comfort and hope. The picture Miss Wynton had painted of her future was so utterly dreary, that the iron entered into her very soul, and she longed to see again the golden visions her "professor" had so often opened before her in the days of her wooing.

It was, therefore, a double shock to find he had none to bestow. The sight of Althea in distress—the sound of her sobs—seemed to quench every ray of hope in the eager young husband. He drew her to him, indeed, and held her close to his breast; but so completely crestfallen had her grief rendered him, that the fair castle of married happiness was for a moment shaken to its foundations.

It was his first *dis*-illusion. He saw life for that one moment in Miss Wynton's view of it; and worse than all, though he did not love his girl-partner one whit the less, it showed him, in its true light, the sacrifice he had persuaded her to make—the wrong he had done her.

So that when Althea, surprised at his silence, lifted her head at last and saw the utter despondency of the face she loved so well, her heart smote her, and her own strong bright nature re-asserted itself the clearer and braver for the storm.

"Why, Roy!" she exclaimed, half laughing through her tears, though her voice shook a little still, "you look like a drenched sparrow with that forlorn face! I am not a Peri shut out of Paradise, after all, and we can be happy together even if Elm-leigh gates *are* closed to us."

But when Roy had departed—relieved, indeed, but with sober face—to give his music lessons, Althea took up the letter again, and felt the strange forlornness tugging at her heart afresh, as she followed the cold, austere sentences. Up

to this moment the child-nature had been uppermost, the looking up to others and accepting guidance; now it was the meeting of the waters, and dimly as she realized it at the time, the turning-point of her whole life had come.

Oh, these crises in life, and the tremendous strain they put upon us for evil or for good! Oh, the mystery of this power of choice, the being entrusted, so to speak, not with our own welfare only, but with that of those around us, and even of the generation yet unborn! Surely the angels look on with intensity of interest at moments such as these, which have in them the colouring of our whole future!

Althea upon the floor, with her letter in her hands, a red spot in each cheek over which the burning tears are falling now she is once more alone—ah! could Miss Horton see her now, her heart would relent towards her favourite pupil, as it had often done before over a difficult task.

But, alas! this is not grammar or history, such as the wilful girl had so buoyantly flung aside but lately; this is a life lesson, with sterner problems and harder reading than Miss Horton ever gave. Let her think it out quietly, and look at it in all its lights. It is the only way to success.

"No Peri at a closed Paradise," she had said just now to Roy. No; but why was it that Elm-leigh had become dearer to her that moment than she had ever known it to be? Why did those memories of careless childhood and girlhood come rushing back with such yearning intensity, now that she knew they had gone for ever? And that old garden, in which Eva and she had played and dreamed, become invested with a love that had something sacred in it, because it was home?

Had she really lost it all by that sudden, impetuous step? Had Felicia and Grace really ceased to look upon her as one of them? And even Eva, when she heard of it (as she must have done ere this), would *Eva* ever think less of her? She never doubted Eva's love, but had she really lost a certain

something by becoming Mrs. Holmes that Eva would instinctively miss when they met again? Not lost dear Elm-leigh alone, but the peculiar aroma of a tested and tried old name, of which she had never been conscious while it was her own? And would she always have to live alone with Roy, and would even Harington people (few of whom Felicia would care to visit) look askance at her, because she had married the organist whose name was yet to make?

For it began dimly to dawn upon Althea that instant, that the organist *might* not be so clever as he thought, and that the grand success he was to achieve was all pure imagination: it was part of the revelation that had come to her when she had turned to him to help her, and when she found he could only suffer with her, instead of shielding her.

She rose from the floor at this point, turned the key in the door with a swift gesture, and threw up the window, wide, wide, as far as it would go, for she must breathe to think; and then, as the thought of his despondent face returned, and of how all his rose-coloured visions had fled at the sight of her tears, her eyes filled once more, but this time with tears that were all for *him*.

"Poor Roy!" she murmured aloud, with a tender smile flashing through the tears—and the crisis was past that instant. Well for Roy, as I said, that this young graft of the Wynton stock was sound as well as sweet, and that after such a review her first words were not, "Poor *me!*"

The sunny child-nature, with its inherent hopefulness, was passing into the deeper waters of womanhood, with its endurance and brave content. Dimly, too, was awakening for the first time the half-maternal instinct, an integral part of the woman's nature; and Althea was planning that, whatever came, Roy should be happy, and that he should never have cause to look again as he had done that morning. So she locked up her letter, washed away in cold water as many traces of her tears as possible, and went to blow away the

"'Poor Roy!' she murmured aloud, with a tender smile flashing through the tears.'"—*p.* 10.

remainder in the outer air; then set to work steadily at her cookery book, to try and find out, as she had been doing ever since she came to Castle Street, why her little dishes did not come to table in the state of perfection promised by those Sibylline leaves, if their advice were duly followed.

"But we *will* do it, Kitty," she said to her little maid, as they stood by the kitchen fire taking it by turns to see who could "toss" pancakes successfully, after repeated failures; and Elm-leigh and even Roy were forgotten for the moment in the anxiety of the undertaking. And when the young mistress, with warm cheeks and eyes still tenderly limpid from the morning's struggle, had at length achieved her first grand success, it was time to slip on her fresh cool dress and meet her organist, with a face as bright as a bird's, at the little front door.

But they never got to Germany! Before six months were over, a little orphan baby was on her way home from Calcutta with the request of a dying mother sewn into her tiny garments, that the little life might be reared under Althea's care.

"With *you*, darling, not at Elm-leigh," the feeble lines ran. "We are own sisters, and you will always love her for my sake. They are kind at heart, but they are stern, and often made us suffer—even you and me. I could not bear to send this baby there alone. You will have children of your own, and you will understand; and as she grows up she will be Eva to you over again."

Perhaps, in the near prospect of Eternity, Major Annesley's young widow had seen things in their true light; had seen that the home of an organist (or even an organ *grinder*, with an honest heart, who would protect her little one) was preferable to a more worldly-wise, but loveless, one elsewhere. Anyway, the sojourn in Germany was again postponed, and the baby found as tender a welcome in Castle Street as she could have done anywhere but in her own mother's bosom.

Life had changed for Althea since that day she sat upon the

floor and gave in a brave answer to the question concerning her lot and its perplexities; whatever might be before her now, her face would ever be towards the light. Half heart-broken as she was at first at the news of her sister's early death, it was yet strangely soothing, after Elm-leigh unkindness, to have Eva's infant confided to her care.

She expected in a few short months to look upon the face of her own firstborn; and as she clasped to her breast this future companion and playfellow of her own little child, it would be hard to say how deeply the mother-heart was stirred.

And how good Roy was too! Was ever husband more tenderly anxious at this critical time, lest the strain should be too great for his wife; or was ever father more devoted to a child of his own than Roy was to this one? What songs he whistled and chirruped and sang! How many animals he imitated twenty times a day—barking like a dog, crowing like a cock, mooing like a cow, till the little Louise screamed with delight, and the shabby house rang with happy laughter! And Althea, as she shared in all these sports, felt a deeper content than she had ever known.

For she knew Roy better now. She had tested, not his strength only, but his weakness; she understood better than in those first passionate days that, deep and loyal as was his devotion, his nature was to lean upon others, and that the moment she faltered and gave way, all would go down together. She must keep him hopeful, even if her own dream of a professorship was less bright.

She was too busy to miss society now, too brave to dream over the dear Surrey home that was closed against her; her face must always be bright, or Roy's would fall instantly, and the little Louise would miss something. So she had no time even to be fearful about herself. Since the day she had forgotten to say, "Poor me," self seemed to have slipped altogether aside, and now the time had come even to lose her own name; for when the little dark-eyed daughter arrived, to

be a sister to Louise, the organist would hear of no other name for her than that of the sunny schoolgirl who had won his heart.

"Brave little Mamsey!" he whispered, in a rapture of tender delight, when she was strong enough for him to come in and out as he pleased (for, as the nurse remarked, "he was like a lost and lorn creature downstairs alone")—"Brave little Mamsey, with her two babies! Who would have thought it is not much more than a year since I used to scold her over her music lessons! And now she is like a tom-tit with her brand-new birdlings, or a young pussy cat, as proud as you please of her downy kittens."

He was leaning against her bed, watching with intense interest his new treasure at her midday meal, one hand occupied with the little Louise, who found the featherbed difficult for upright walking, and who kept staggering face downwards to get towards her mother and the mysterious bundle at her breast.

Althea flashed him an arch look at the mention of the "scoldings," but reply was cut short at the moment by a gurgling in baby's windpipe, that necessitated immediate bolstering up and readjustment; and when this was completed, it was time for Roy to depart.

"God bless my little Mamsey!" were his parting words, as he hung over her. "And if that morsel of humanity will only turn out worthy of her mother, I shall be rich indeed."

"Even if, like her mother, she can never learn sharps from flats," was the parting shot, in the cheery little voice from the bed.

But Roy only shook his head and withdrew, in wholesome dread of nurse with her long face, who treated him like a child.

And Mamsey's new name clung to her ever afterwards; and the Althea we shall henceforth know is the little stranger we have just surprised at such an interesting time.

CHAPTER II.

CROSS-CURRENTS.

"Life is a great bundle of little things."
O. W. HOLMES.

AND what was going on in Castle Street while the "professor" was playing the "Wedding March," and straining the arms of the little blower to keep pace with him in his exhilaration? It was no unusual thing for Louise to get a letter. The postman brought more communications for Miss Annesley than for any one else in the house; but the unusual thing was that it left her perplexed and disturbed. So much so, that she slipped away to her own room to think things over, leaving Mamsey and Althea in the midst of their sewing at the dining-room table; and now, after a good half-hour's meditation, she was only a little nearer the mark.

Only a little. But when it is to a definite goal, a little is everything; and the result of that restless half-hour was to bring Louise nearer and nearer to Aunt Felicia's views—that the wedding must take place nowhere but at Elm-leigh, the right and fitting place for Eva Wynton's daughter to start upon her new life, just as Eva herself had done five and twenty years or so before.

For though Eva's dying request had been faithfully fulfilled, and her baby had found a home with her own sister, the gates of Elm-leigh were ever thrown wide to her, as soon as she was old enough to enter them alone; and though Castle Street

was by tacit and silent consent recognized as the *home*, Louise Annesley had spent some months of every year under her aunts' roof, and the quiet, graceful girl had taken her place there as naturally as if no Castle Street existed.

If her temperament had been more impulsive, her emotions stronger, or her tact less, the contrast between the two places of abode and the two ways of thinking would have made the young girl's life more difficult even than it had been. As it was, it had had its difficulties; and it was greatly to Louise's credit that so few had seen them, or known to which home she was the more attached.

Hers was not a passionate nature, but one of those that love widely rather than intensely; and though, until Frank Conway appeared, no one came anywhere near Mamsey in her affection, she found Aunt Felicia and Aunt Grace dear old ladies to live with, and settled down to her long, indefinite visits in happy content.

For it cannot be denied, Louise was more *herself* in the old Surrey home. From the moment of arrival, when she gave her keys to her aunt's maid to unpack her clothes, she always breathed more freely, and felt that she was easier; there were fewer demands upon her affection, and the very fact that her love for Mamsey was deeper and stronger only made certain incongruities in Castle Street all the more painful to her ease-loving nature, from the effort to avoid betraying it. And when the same girl who had rolled along in the time-honoured carriage, paying country visits, returned to the obscure little house in Harington, and cheerfully took her share in its domestic duties, it was greatly to her credit, as I said, that she managed so harmoniously to blend two distinct patterns that the join did not show more than it did.

But they *were* distinct, conceal it as she would, and never so painfully distinct as this afternoon, while reading Aunt Felicia's letter. The lover who had won her heart at Elmleigh, and was so soon to take her out to India, just like her

mother before her, was not ignorant indeed of Castle Street and its belongings; for Louise had often spoken warmly of the almost mother who had brought her up, and she had always meant, in spite of everything, to be married there.

It would be a little more difficult than anything had hitherto been—the grafting a piece of Elm-leigh life straight on to Castle Street; and even Louise's sweet, placid nature had not dared to contemplate it too closely. But now, as she read and re-read her letter, Miss Wynton's "of course" took firmer and firmer possession of the reader's mind.

Of course it would be a great deal easier; Louise did not need to be told that. Of course it would spare Mamsey and the rest an immense inconvenience in those tiny rooms; and a June wedding from under the elms in the Surrey home would be an utterly different thing than one from a close Harington Street. Louise had not been blind to this before, but her vision was clearer than ever now, and Miss Felicia's last hint about the social prestige of a Wynton wedding only aggravated the perplexity of the decision.

She knew that Aunt Felicia shrank from all mention of the "organist," and that to have him give away her favourite niece would be mortification indeed. Yes, it was all clear enough. But, on the other hand, the home that had sheltered her, the sister who had grown up beside her, the brothers who had always been good to her at heart, in spite of boyish bluntness about her "fine lady ways;" last, but first and best and chiefest of all, *Mamsey*—the dear, brave little mother. Oh, it was this that flushed her cheek, and lined her usually placid brow, and made that May afternoon a misery just then.

Perhaps Mamsey's quick intuition divined the cause of the long absence; for, laying down her work at last, she sought Louise in her little sanctum, and her bright face brought relief at once. The girl rose hastily from her seat and, drawing her mother gently into it, knelt beside her with one arm clasping

her waist, and, while she placed the letter in her hands, laid her flushed cheek on the ever tender mother-bosom.

Mamsey saw it all directly, and her heart failed her for one brief minute; but it was not so much Felicia's hints that pained her so keenly, as that the almost daughter beside her should hesitate in her choice. She would not disclose, if she could help it, to which side she herself inclined, but only ratify the girl in whichever course her inclination prompted; so she only said gently, "Aunt Felicia wishes to have the wedding there, I see."

Louise's clasp tightened a little, but she did not lift her head, so she did not see the look of pain in the face above her, so bravely kept out of the voice. If she had, her reply might have been different; as it was, she only said, falteringly—

"Yes, Mamsey, darling, she thinks it would save you such an immensity of trouble, you know; and even a simple and quiet wedding would put us all about dreadfully—*here.* Don't you think, yourself, it would perhaps be best?"

Mamsey saw now to which side the balance inclined—where the casting vote must go. She thought involuntarily in that moment of the babe she had reared—of Althea's disappointment, of Roy's dismay—and it was hard work now to keep her voice quite steady; and while she waited, Louise added hastily—

"Of course I could not be married without you, mother; and equally, of course, Aunt Felicia will see that for herself; and if you will only come—and Althea—it will be almost the same thing, and save you the trouble and fatigue you are not fit for. You *would* come and see the last of your child, wouldn't you, dearest? It would be only half a wedding without you."

Mamsey stooped and kissed the hot and troubled face as she rose to go. She knew the child was not satisfied, and her heart yearned over her; but the mother-heart was divided, and was busy now with others as well as Louise. Was not

Roy, at this very moment, perhaps, practising the "Wedding March"? for she had seen him look it out just before starting, and only that morning he had been joyously planning the doings of the grand day drawing near. And Roy would be home soon, and must hear the change of plan from no one but herself.

Mamsey rose at once, and saying very gently, "You had better write your letter now, dear, for fear of interruptions," lost no time in gaining her own room.

"Poor Roy, it was hard for him," was the first thought. After all the care of these two and twenty years, was he to be put aside and completely ignored in this fashion? Mamsey was not angry with Louise; she knew, quite as well as the girl herself, that Elm-leigh had no place in it for the organist, and that it was more delicate to leave his name out of the arrangements altogether, if the wedding should indeed be there. After the first involuntary disappointment in Louise's choice, Mamsey's thoughts flew back to the day when she and Roy had joined their destinies, of the problems life had had for her since, and of the way in which self-effacement had proved her only answer.

There was just time to pen a little note to Elm-leigh, to go, all unknown to Louise, by the same post as her own. Louise was writing now, and begging for an invitation for the mother who had reared her, and Mamsey was content that the letter should go. She could not have borne it for Louise *not* to wish her presence. At the same time she must give up the pleasure of being with Eva's child, rather than leave Roy to droop alone, and to ask himself, as he did even now sometimes, if he had done his wife a grievous wrong to marry her.

So Mamsey wrote her letter, only asking that Althea might be her cousin's bridesmaid (cousin, she termed Louise to Elm-leigh correspondents, though always sister at home); and then slipped on her bonnet to take the letter to the post herself, unknown to any. She was more satisfied when it was really

done, though her heart was still sore; and it was just like Mamsey that, coming past a confectioner's, she should pause suddenly and go in, in quest of crumpets for tea.

"I can't 'stay him with flagons,' she murmured to herself, with her own bright, tender, little smile, as she carried home her parcel; "but Roy does like a tea-cake, even if winter is over."

She had learned the lesson, if any woman had, that "the way to home happiness lies over little stepping-stones;" for, since the day she had set herself to be a good wife to Roy, she had trodden that way so often that it was a beaten track to her now, followed almost unconsciously. Think not lightly of her as she wends homeward with the paper bag she was not ashamed to carry—the slight figure in its black lace shawl, a trifle browner than it used to be. Perhaps (who knows?) the angels are looking down upon the sweet bright face in loving interest, and wondering how soon it will be with them!

Louise's letter was not finished, she found, on reaching home; for the vicar had just called, and was with Miss Annesley in the little drawing-room. The dining-room was still heaped with unfinished work, but Althea had flown.

Mamsey was glad not to disturb them, for she did want to be ready for her husband when he came in, and Kitty was crotchety, and could not always be relied on; so what more natural than that, after clearing the dining-room, she should go to the kitchen and herself begin her labour of love.

She was not the woman to be fond of her kitchen in an afternoon, and seldom intruded on Kitty at that time; but, on occasions like this, she fancied Roy knew her touch from any other, and she was almost glad to be alone, doing some homely service for him. So she bent contentedly over her task, the merry voices of Althea and the boys reaching her from time to time, borne in from the long, straggling garden.

It had been a dull afternoon for Althea. Never devoted to her needle, she had sat down with rigid determination that

day, to finish the share in Louise's work she had imposed upon herself, for the long patient hours that Mamsey spent over Louise's trosseau made her sadly self-reproachful. Althea was too unselfish to look on willingly at another's sacrifice; and she had achieved no inconsiderable amount of work herself, though the inactive occupation wearied her far more than rapid movement. It was restless work to sit sewing while Louise and Mamsey were cogitating above over the Elm-leigh letter. As she was not called into conference, however, she plodded bravely on, only easing her feelings ever and anon by a prolonged stretch, and (sorrowfully be it confessed) an occasional whistle. This last in a very subdued key, for it had been the cause of sundry skirmishes with Louise.

Then came her mother's step and the sound of the opening front door, and Althea, longing for company in her uncongenial task, as she never did when otherwise engaged, called out, wonderingly—

"Going out, Mamsey?"

"Only to post, dear; I shall be back in ten minutes," the door closing immediately, for the mother had had the relief of just a few tears, alone in her room, and she would not for the world have their traces seen, to make Louise unhappy.

And then Althea heard the vicar asking for Miss Annesley; and she plodded on once more all alone till again the door opened, and two bright faces looked in together.

"Heigho!" cried the younger lad. "Beanstick all alone over her sewing, like Patience on a monument—wonders will never cease! But where's Mamsey?"

That was always everybody's first question, for the mother had long earned the true mother-right of being the magnet in her home, towards whom all the other members turned instinctively. No one seemed able to settle down to occupation on coming in until Mamsey had been appealed to; and the frail little figure, with its ever-welcoming face, was unconsciously leaned upon by tall grown-up sons as much as by the girls.

"I don't feel like Patience," was Althea's reply; "but, thank goodness I have almost done, for it's lonely work stitching by one's self. Louise had a letter from Elm-leigh this afternoon, and she has not been visible since; and now Mamsey's gone off to post, so I expect something is in the wind. Hush, Jack! Don't whistle so loudly; one can hear everything in the drawing-room, and Mr. Thorpe is there now with Louise."

And Althea knitted her brows and went on resolutely with her button-holes; while Jack, who had put his tongue into his cheek in a horrible manner at the mention of the vicar, now seated himself on the table at his sister's side, to the imminent danger of Louise's delicate trimmings; and Edmund brought round one of the plans he had just been making at the architect's office, in which he was articled, and held it out for inspection.

The sewing dropped from her hands, as Althea forgot everything for a moment in the interest of her brother's progress. There are sisters' sisters and brothers' sisters in the world, and this girl was pre-eminently of the latter order; at least, never having had a real sister of her own, we cannot say whether she would have had as firm a sway in a sister's heart as she held in these two beside her.

Arthur, the one separated from her in age by only a year, and away now in a Liverpool bank, was always more of a stranger to her; but Edmund, the quiet, observant boy, had ever been his sister's warm champion and loving companion, and now, in his opening manhood, was finding in Althea not only sister, but friend. He often appeared the elder of the two, in spite of her two years' seniority and taller stature; for Edmund had taken life more seriously than his sister, and under the calm exterior a keen observer could recognize the depths beneath. Though his voice was generally the least heard in the little home, his were the most observant eyes, and but little escaped their quiet scrutiny; and Mamsey, though she leaned upon this lad of twenty, and unconsciously

appealed to him more than to her other children—even Mamsey did not know how much Edmund gathered, nor how truly he gauged their life.

And Jack, with his father's buoyant, hopeful nature (that, like his, was so apt to falter and droop if things were not made smooth for him)—Jack, with his mother's sunny eyes and soft brown hair, and his father's slight, athletic figure—who could help loving Jack? No one in that house; least of all, mother and sister.

He was the youngest and pet of all—five years after Edmund the Sedate; and now, just finishing school as he was, it was the chief cross of his life, that he still lacked one full inch to reach his sister's height. It was nothing to Ted, dear, good-natured fellow, that he was left far behind, and, like Mamsey and Louise, had given in early. To be overtopped by a woman, and that one's own sister, was almost a disgrace to Jack; and it was he who, in secret envy and pretended derision, had christened her "Beanstick" years ago.

"Come into the garden a bit, Al," he now urged, when tired of snipping bits of long-cloth with Louise's scissors; "you've not achieved that steeplechase yet, and you said you should not rest till you had. Come, Teddy, we'll go and fix it before she comes."

And so the two roamed off together down the long, straggling, untidy garden at the back of the house—that garden that was almost a trial to Louise, who always attacked it with trowel and rake and scissors when she returned from Elm-leigh, but whose unaided efforts failed to keep it in order.

Here rushed Althea when her self-imposed task was at last completed; and delighted to be astir again with those long lithe limbs of hers, she was quite ready to accept Jack's challenge of the bar that had hitherto fairly beaten her. She was a perfect child still at times like these, in a way that was incomprehensible to Louise, who, even at sixteen, had been a thorough little lady, and whom Althea's varying moods puzzled sorely.

And here, as evil fortune would have it, Louise was actually leading Mr. Thorpe, at this critical time. He had finished his talk with her, and on hinting he would like a word with Miss Holmes, to try if she could at last be persuaded to take the Sunday class Miss Annesley was resigning, Louise had proposed they should seek her in the garden, as the dining-room was deserted. To her horror, as they entered the long centre path, she descried the hurdle, the brothers holding it steadily in its place, and cheering on Althea for the final spring, who, all unconscious of the visitor behind her, was taking the preparatory run for a determined effort.

"Althea!" cried Louise, and her voice was almost hoarse in its warning. It was too late. The boys grasped the situation, but mischief kept them silent though their eyes danced; as for Althea, she had no eyes or ears just then for Louise's reproof. There was a momentary gathering up of her forces—a short, preliminary run—and then as she triumphantly cleared the bar, amid shouts of "Well done, Beanstick!" she turned laughingly round, to see for the first time that Louise was right.

As for the vicar, his eyes danced at that moment almost as much as those of the lads; but this was no comfort to Althea. After the momentary shock, her first impulse was to rush among the adjacent trees, and hide her burning face and her mortification at so hoydenish a pastime being observed. But Mamsey's daughter knew better than that; and so, hardly knowing what she did in the confusion of the moment, she half covered her face, and, with a little bow, only faltered, "I cry you mercy, gentle sir. I had no idea you were in the garden," and then seized her brother Jack by the sleeve and bounded away.

"Never again; oh, never again!" she gasped when safely out of sight and earshot. "Oh, Jack! you treacherous fellow, to think of your never telling me, and letting me make such an exhibition of myself before Mr. Thorpe! It will be all

over the town to-morrow, and people will think me even more of a March hare than they do now! But oh, Jack! did I clear it all right? For goodness' sake, tell me the worst!"

"I could not tell," laughed Jack, willing to have a little more fun yet. "Never mind, old girl; as for the parson, it will do him good, and take the starch out of him. I believe he enjoyed it as much as ourselves."

Althea groaned and hid her face on his shoulder. "I shall never look him in the face again," she said; "but this shall be a lesson to me, and you shall never tempt me over a hurdle again. It is time I put away childish things, now Louise is going away. But now, Jack, run and see if the coast is clear, for here I shall stay till it is."

Perhaps Jack was right about it doing the parson good, for though he prudently waived the subject of the Sunday school for the present—indeed, the idea of the young madcap as a Sunday-school teacher was simply ludicrous just then—she did not sink so irretrievably in his estimation as Louise had feared. She had always been a little stiff and reserved with him hitherto, resisting all efforts to lure her into parish work, so that he had often contrasted her most unfavourably with her cousin, whose sweet and gracious manner won its way with all.

To-day, however, he had struck suddenly upon a bit of genuine native ore, and the surprise of the whole scene, and the funny little old-world speech with which Althea had sought to cover her confusion, quite refreshed the vicar, accustomed as he was to seeing people more or less under the mask of parish relations. His surprise was not over yet either, for as he turned back towards the house with the same amused look in his eyes, he came upon another little domestic episode.

Poor Louise! It had been a trying afternoon for her from beginning to end. Disturbed in her perplexing letter by the

vicar's arrival, who would have thought, as she led him innocently into the garden, that Althea would have chosen that identical moment to leap a hurdle as if she had been a young colt? And now, as if that were not enough, behold, through the kitchen window, Mamsey toasting crumpets for tea—a thing she only did three times out of a hundred—*Mamsey*, whom Louise had thought to be out walking, and whom the vicar would now put down to be the usual cook of the family!

Mr. Thorpe had caught a glimpse of her, and with innate delicacy had at once turned away; but Mrs. Holmes had seen the look, and now took the matter into her own hands, in her own bright way.

"I am preparing a little treat for my husband," she said, intercepting the trio as they were passing the door, and coming out with a plate of the delicately brown crumpets in her hand. "See, Mr. Thorpe, I indulge myself in this way now and then, when my handmaiden will permit it. Can I not tempt you into passing an opinion?" And Mamsey looked so sweet and natural, as she raised the bright silver cover and held her handiwork towards him, that Mr. Thorpe was fairly won, and enjoyed his delicate slice, out there in the garden sunshine, better than he had ever done in the drawing-room at afternoon tea.

It was such a pretty home-picture. The mother, in one of the bright crimson shawls she always wore about her slender shoulders—the sunlight burnishing the soft wavy hair into brighter brown, as it nestled away under the dainty cap—*she* was the central figure, as she stood with one hand on the arm of her devoted son, chatting brightly with the vicar, and listening to the tale of Althea's exploits.

She looked so dear, so natural, that Louise—who had gone into the house to restore the dish to the fire—lingered there still, till the whole scene had impressed itself on her memory. Was it the feeling that she had been disloyal at the last to the home that had sheltered her, and the more than mother who

had reared her, that filled her eyes with a sudden dew? Any way, she did not again join the little group outside, but, going upstairs to her still unfinished letter, added, "I cannot be married without Mamsey. Dear Aunt Felicia, for my sake ask her and Althea, and then all will go well." And as she closed and directed the envelope, Louise murmured half aloud, "God bless her, the precious little mother!"

CHAPTER III.

A FAMILY COUNCIL.

"Nothing refines like affection. Family jarring vulgarises; family union elevates."—CHARLOTTE BRONTË (*Shirley*).

"All the peace which springs
From the large aggregate of little things—
On these small cares of daughter, wife, or friend,
The almost sacred joys of home depend."

HANNAH MORE.

MAY had not long melted into June when the time came for Louise to turn for ever the page of her Castle Street life, and to pay a long farewell to the little house, crammed so full of memories. It had had its trials, as we have seen. Louise had never been intended for small rooms and cheap furniture; and warmly as Harington's society had always received Major Annesley's daughter, there had ever been a certain sense of incongruity in her life that half oppressed her, and made it seem natural that she should breathe more freely when in the Surrey village. It was not that Louise was selfish in a sense of escape from petty privations. Had there been more selfishness, she would have felt her difficulties less. As it was, she never settled down to enjoy her long Elm-leigh visit without a painful feeling that Mamsey ought to enjoy it too—this return to the home of her childhood, that held so firm a hold on her affections. And when the visit was over, and Louise returned to Castle Street, and the little silver card-case that was so often on duty in Surrey, began its round once more in

Harington, she often made an attempt to draw Althea into her visiting circle, from a genuine desire for her young cousin's advantage.

But it had never succeeded. Althea was too unsophisticated to enjoy calling, and had not the least ambition for either a card-case or a visiting list. Just now and again she permitted her name to be pencilled beneath that of Miss Annesley; but her presence always hindered Louise's pleasure. Either Althea was proud and sensitive, and saw, or imagined, a difference in the reception accorded them, or she made one of her sudden, unforeseen, odd little speeches, that sounded pleasant enough in the untidy home garden, but was hardly appreciated in Harington drawing-rooms. So when Louise had gone off in her pretty walking costume to pay calls, or to visit her district, Althea had generally preferred a sunny window-seat at home, with some queer old-world volume, until the boys were free to join her in a ramble.

It had all been so natural a part of their life, while it was being lived; but now that it was over, and the interlude had come, between turning down that leaf of her history and the beginning the fresh, unknown page, Louise's memories were very tender and pensive; and a measure of that self-accusation that had haunted her the day she decided to do as Aunt Felicia asked, returned now in abundant force.

The boys had labelled and carried down her trunks that would never more know Castle Street as a home. They had paid their affectionate farewells before leaving for their respective occupations, and Uncle Roy had just given her his last kiss, and had gone downstairs humming an air in his loudest key, to hide, as she well knew, the emotion the parting awoke in his tender, clinging nature. Althea had already gone on to the station, to be in readiness to see her off; and now there was only the mother to bid her adieu. And the young bride-elect lingered in the little room that had so long sheltered her, waiting for the parting she dreaded most of all.

For, of course, as we know, Mamsey was not going to Elmleigh, and Althea was to follow her cousin in a week or so, to be ready for the wedding. Mamsey had arranged it all, brightly enough—had consoled Louise for the pain of her decision, and cheered and comforted Roy in the disappointment she knew he felt, and had had so little leisure to brood over her own share of loss, that any one would have thought she was the least concerned of all in the family event.

People tell us that in death by drowning, the whole past life passes in review before us as a panoramic scene. In a similar manner, though, of course, in considerably lessened distinctness, did Louise's musings travel, as she waited those last minutes before the cab came to fetch her away. Had she been all to Uncle Roy he had deserved she should be? He had tossed her in his arms as a little child, and been the best playfellow baby had ever had; between that time and now, when she heard him go whistling downstairs, had she ever been really *necessary* to him? Would he miss her much when her place knew her no more?

And Althea, and the boys, and Mamsey. Ah! here was Mamsey at last—the face flushed and quivering through the radiant smile—purposely delaying the parting till the wheels were heard, because she knew she could not keep up long. But Louise saw it all, and, breaking down altogether, she clung to her dear foster-parent till Mamsey had to tear herself away, and fairly send the weeping girl downstairs. Mamsey's face was at the window as long as Louise could see it, and then she had a few minutes locked in her own room, to get calm and quiet before Althea should return—that same room in which, as a young bride, she had fought out that other battle more than twenty years ago.

There was nothing striking or imposing about it—that quiet room, with its sunny window overlooking the straggling garden —its worn carpet and muslin curtains, and the little couch at the foot of the bed, on which Mamsey never liked to be seen

snatching a few minutes' rest, for fear they should think her over-tired. Yet there is many such a room, rendered sacred by memories of unselfish devotion, on whose threshold we might well pause, and put our shoes from off our feet, for it is hallowed ground.

It is true that that one victory over self had made the way of the young wife wonderfully clearer, and had set her so bravely forward in the path of duty, that she had few real conflicts, so definite and decided had been her resolve. Nevertheless, it by no means followed that her trials were over; for, as the years passed on, the mother had full many an anxious hour. It was she who had superintended the education of her little ones, and chosen their schools. It was to the mother that each had turned in difficulties over lessons, to get the encouragement and help they needed; and (ah, poor Mamsey!) how many times she had upbraided herself for neglecting Miss Horton's instructions, now that they would have been so priceless here. But she had done what she could; and many an hour the brave little soul had grappled with French idioms and Latin verbs, all by herself, that she might be ready to smooth the way for her boys and girls, when they should appeal to her in their peculiar difficulties from time to time.

But when schooldays were over, graver cares had set in. Roy worked hard all day at his music lessons and other matters, that the daily table might be provided, and the household demands met. It was cruel to cloud his content in the present with questions about the children's future; so as he took the repose so hardly won, it was the mother who consumed so many hours of what should have been rest, with plans for her eldest boy when the time had come to choose his path in life.

Mamsey had accepted seclusion and neglect herself, and if Roy's visions of musical greatness had faded, and he was peacefully content with his lot, she could be satisfied too. But it was different for the young opening lives. She could not bear that they should spend their best years in visions that

were never to be fulfilled: so for want of something better, Arthur, who was not either talented or ambitious, had accepted the vacant post in a city bank.

As for Edmund, who was cast in a different mould, the mother had other views for him. She had a little money saved for emergencies—her share of her own mother's portion —and though Edmund's articles would cut so deeply into it that the remainder would be a mere pittance to divide among the others, they all, more or less willingly, fell in with the plan, Edmund alone shrinking from such a sacrifice on his behalf. But if her sons made her very thoughtful, Mamsey's soul was often troubled for the future of her daughter also—that little conglomeration of contradictions—Althea, with the tall, slender, unfinished figure, and the still more unfinished face, and who at two and twenty seemed grown up in nothing but in stature.

She had such different moods that it was no wonder the mobile face changed its expression fifty times a-day, and that few, if any, really *knew* Althea Holmes. Some of Louise's friends thought her shy; others, reserved and unapproachable; and all mentally or openly contrasted her most unfavourably with her cousin, usually ending their disparaging remarks with, "But after all, what can one expect?" So Harington society mostly ignored her, as was natural, except when her kinship with Miss Annesley made a little attention necessary; while Althea as yet hardly appreciated her loss. In her present undeveloped stage, home and its dear ones were almost enough for her; and with one of her beloved books for company, in long summer rambles by the river side, the girl wished for no other.

But the mother looked farther ahead, and her heart often misgave her for this portionless child—a stranger even in her own birthplace, and without the dower of beauty that is sometimes a woman's best heritage—at least, in the eyes of the world. No one had ever called Althea beautiful—her outlines were

crude and a little rugged even now, and there were times when she looked positively plain, except for the great speaking brown eyes with their silken lashes and beautifully arched brows, that would never let her face be quite commonplace, even at the worst.

It was a beauty apart from form or colour, though Althea's eyes possessed both of these; it was rather that they were ever revealing, all unknown to herself, the soul within. Even in her most uncompromising moods, when the expression became almost sullen in its reserve, those great eyes of hers could not be frozen into absolute silence; but when leaping into sunshine at some rich jest, or melting into strange dewy softness under their wet lashes, over some ennobling poem Edmund read aloud, Althea's eyes would almost startle her mother sometimes in their depth and tenderness.

Roy's eyes had had something of the same liquid light when he had given her organ lessons long years ago; but Mamsey could not fail to see that there were greater depths in this opening soul than the father's eyes had ever revealed.

So the mother had many thoughts all to herself in the night watches, and the few tears she indulged in, were mostly shed then. She never wished the rash deed of her youth undone; but the question to which she could find no answer was, whether that hasty step would make it difficult walking for other lives, far dearer than her own.

All the harder it was for her, that no friend or sister was near to share her burden with her; hardest of all, that Mamsey only dimly recognized the Eternal Verities that find an answer when none else can.

Felicia and Grace had taken care that their young half-sisters should be duly educated in doctrinal formularies; and to be baptized and confirmed was as regular and respectable a part of Elm-leigh upbringing as the use of the back-board and embroidery in silks. But the faith that yearns for unseen realities was a thing the Wyntons would not have understood

at all: the very name had no meaning in such a household, beyond that in which it is used, side by side with "justification," in the somewhat wearying controversies of theological treatises.

But, though Roy's wife had been meagrely equipped, in a religious sense, for her life-journey, yet had she learned the lessons of the way patiently and well—so well, that many of her fellow-parishioners (to some of whom Mrs. Holmes's rare communions were matters of grave remark might have done wisely to follow in her footsteps.

And so, reader, you and I—diligent attendants upon the means of grace as perhaps we are—may well pause and reflect before we judge such lives as these. They are around us in every place—meek, patient, faithful souls, with, it may be, but a rushlight gleam upon their daily path; yet walking by that frail light with brave unfaltering steps, such as may well reprove our larger knowledge.

If, indeed, it is larger knowledge. Who shall say?

True, there was no faldstool in that faded room, and Mamsey's daily prayer beside her couch was of the shortest and simplest description; granted that her hands were so full of homely offices for her loved ones that her place was often vacant at the Festival services; yet may it not have been that that self-forgetting love of hers counted as devotion with Him whose commandment began and ended with Love, and that the day might be coming when St. Paul's words should be verified in her case, "Whom ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you"?

The good-night kiss between mother and daughter was even more clinging than usual on the evening after the first break in the circle; but next morning Mamsey was alert and busy as usual, for all her spare time must go now to getting Althea ready for this coming visit of hers, and the interval was so short they must needs be industrious. With a longer purse, things would have been more easily achieved,

it is true; but whether so much family affection would have been wrought into a brief order for an outfit, as into those loving little plannings and trimmings and stitchings they had together, is quite another matter.

"You will wear white in the evenings, I expect," Mamsey said; "at least, that is what Eva and I always wore in the old days. To be sure, we were hardly out of the schoolroom, and it is all so long ago that fashions may have changed since then. Anyway, if Aunt Felicia sees anything that she may wish altered, or if, as no doubt she will, she wishes to give you something besides your bridesmaid's dress, you must not be foolish and sensitive. Remember, if we are poor we need not thrust our poverty upon others, to their discomfort."

Althea looked defiant for half a minute.

"If I am poor, I would rather be independent, mother," she said hotly, "and not be clothed as well as fed by the bounty of strangers; for they *are* strangers to me, in spite of the relationship."

"Nonsense, you baby," was the quick retort, in the cheery tone that always chased away rising ill-tempers; "for you *are* a perfect baby, and not to be trusted out of my sight, if you will make such speeches as those. People who are poor and proud are like stinging nettles—prickly company at best; and as you are invited to Elm-leigh, you must study to do as others wish, and not think of yourself."

So the subject dropped, Althea comforting herself, in her ignorance, with the thought that with the small additions to her simple wardrobe that they were jointly preparing, she need not dread the Wynton alms, except so far as concerned her bridesmaid's attire.

And one of her last home memories, those opening mid-summer days, was the standing with Mamsey in her sunny window, as they thoughtfully turned over together the contents of a little Russia-leather box—the trinkets that had been sent twenty years ago, with the cruel Elm-leigh letter. Nothing

of great value, but enough to give point and finish to a girl's equipment; and though Althea had thought that she cared nothing for jewellery, she gratefully accepted a brooch or two and a string of pearls.

But they all had a good laugh at her that night when, by her mother's wish, she slipped into the family circle in all the bravery of her new attire, to receive the criticism of father and brothers; and for a little while the tall slim figure on the hearth, in its white draperies, was the centre of animated interest and eager comment.

"Bravo!" cried Jack, springing up so suddenly from the exercise he was preparing, that the Latin dictionary fell crashing to the floor. "Bravo, and three times three! Here's Beanstick coming out in a new character—quite different to the one of which she treated his Reverence to a private view the other day in the garden! But, I say, Al, don't you let them make a fine lady of you, and spoil you, or I shall owe the venerated aunts a greater grudge than I do now."

"And don't learn old-maidish ways either," put in Edmund, as soon as he could get in a word, "for that would be almost as great a calamity;" while the father, turning from his book to survey his tall daughter, whispered archly in her ear—

"Who knows but *Althea* may be going to meet her *Lovelace?*"

It was very ridiculous of them all to make so much ado about a girl in a white frock only going to visit her relations in the country. Many a girl of her age would have gone to Court without half so much loving excitement over her presentation dress. But if, as the poet tells us, "There's nothing great or small" in itself, but only relatively, it is more easily understood. It is in proportion as a home *is* a home, and not a mere boarding-house, that all the little daily episodes acquire their real significance, and go far towards filling, in after years, the chambers of memory with sacred music. Perhaps the old Teuton bards meant something of this when they sang so

often of a roof-*tree*. Surely underneath that word there lies a parable, as in so many of their expressions.

One sees the idea linked with it—the blossoming and expansion, the living and growing principle bound up in the tree, as in the humblest home where love and nature rule, but which no palatial edifice can furnish if these are lacking.

Even under that foolish speech of the "professor's," that reached no ear but Althea's, there was lurking a certain something she did not understand, and of which he was, perhaps, but half conscious himself. For, to tell the truth, dutiful and affectionate as Louise had ever been to her Uncle Roy, he had a subtle, intuitive idea that he was far from being necessary to her happiness; and perhaps this helped him to see more clearly than he otherwise would have done, the simple fact that Louise cast her cousin in the shade. And the father's natural jealousy was aroused for his daughter and her interests.

Jealousy is perhaps too strong a word to apply to one so gentle as he was; yet, with the remembrance of what his girl-wife had been when he wooed and won her, and with the constant sight of Louise's rounded comeliness, and dainty, gracious ways, it must be confessed that the second Althea was far from coming up to her father's wishes for her. And a tinge of jealous regret for that unfinished face of hers, and her occasional untidiness of person, made him oftentimes a little more brusque than he intended. So now this unexpected vision of his daughter pleased and touched him; it showed him new possibilities, and called that foolish word to his lips almost before he was aware. And while Mamsey stroked a fold in place, and Edmund suggested a slight alteration here and there, Althea's great soft eyes were radiant over her loved ones, and her cheeks glowed under their gratified gaze.

But there was a great lump in her throat next day, when the time came to say good-bye to home. She had known so little of partings that to leave the nest that had reared her—even for a short visit—touched a very tender chord within, and the

farewell embrace with the little mother amounted almost to pain. It struck her afresh, with a sudden pang, that Mamsey looked thinner than she used to do; not worn or haggard—Mamsey's face would never be that—but more etherealized, so to speak; and it made that drive through the familiar streets a very thoughtful one to the young traveller.

Edmund was at the station to see her off—getting her ticket and having her trunks labelled in his usual fatherly way—and at the last moment he sprang into the carriage beside her, and took his tall sister in his arms.

"Good-bye, Al, old girl; we shall all be glad to see your face again. And mind, whatever you do, don't come back a fine lady or a finicky old maid."

"I shall come back just as I go," was the only answer there was time to give, for the next instant the train had started, and Harington and all that belonged to it were being left far behind.

CHAPTER IV.

AN OLD GARDEN.

"Delicious nest of coolness and repose!
Here in the olden days
Bloomed many a lily pale and crimson rose,
In dim, secluded ways."

F. B. DOVETON.

"Gray twilight poured
On dewy pastures, dewy trees,
Softer than sleep . . .
A haunt of ancient Peace."

Palace of Art.

THAT common little nest in Castle Street, unknown not only to the world, but even to the very modest portion of it comprised in a small country town like Harington, had reared a queer brood of young sparrows, of which Althea was not the only unsophisticated fledgeling.

The wonder would have been if matter-of-fact, prosaic sons and daughters had been the result of a union between a father who doted on music, and spent his little leisure over Shakespeare or Ben Jonson, when his fellow mortals turned to the politics of the day—and of a mother who had run away from school while in her teens to marry her music-master.

They all had a dash of Bohemianism in their composition, and the fact of having so little society threw them naturally more upon each other, and developed their home resources;

so that they were far less to be pitied than their neighbours imagined.

It was the mother, as I have said, who looked most ahead, and was most anxious about the time when these home pages should be turned. The father had few misgivings; the children were children still to him—accustomed as he was to their noisy chatter and mad pranks; even his occasional uneasiness about his daughter's lack of personal charms did not linger long. All would come right in time. But they were not quite such children as he fancied them. Edmund had not pored over romances and poetry for nothing, and already this lad of twenty was full of day-dreams. The strange part of it was that dreams were not for himself, but all for Althea; nothing seemed, in his boyish thought, too wonderful for the opening future to bring to her. It was a chivalrous affection he entertained for these three types of womanhood—almost the only ones he knew as yet—the bright, unselfish little mother, the fair cousin, and the sister who was also *friend*. Edmund always felt older than this sister of his, and had the instinctive feeling that he must guard her ignorance—this girl who, madcap as she was at times, would recoil at the slightest breath of coarseness or undue freedom.

But in thoughtful moods, when they read together, and Edmund expounded some old-world poem or classic tale, and when she lifted soft limpid eyes to his at some grand ennobling thought, the lad wondered now and then if Althea had dreams of her own. Perhaps she had. She had been two years longer in the world than he, and she, too, loved old poems; perhaps, though her visions were of the dimmest and vaguest description, it had dawned upon Althea that she *could* give, as well as receive, happiness—some day—far, far away in the future.

She was terribly childish and backward, you see, without the remotest idea of doing the best for herself, or of making the most of such opportunities as she had. She had not been out

in the world enough to learn a woman's duty, and with her head in the clouds, as it often was, she had no eyes for the prosaic walking of everyday life.

Althea had no match-making mother either, to encourage vague hopes in her of a future "establishment." Now, it is true, as the train bore her swiftly through the beautiful Thames valley that June afternoon, she had no need of any other occupation than that afforded by her wondering thoughts—thoughts of what the coming days had in store for her; and she was half sorry to awake from dreams and find herself in the new world of London, where she must bestir herself for action.

Then came a bit of suburban travelling, in a somewhat crowded compartment; but Althea could waste no thoughts just then upon her neighbours. She wanted all her attention for the country she was entering, for she was not far now from her mother's home, and she longed to see with her own eyes, and Mamsey's too, the familiar land-marks of which she had often heard.

Ah! here was the station; and here, among one or two more spruce and modern equipages, was the sober chariot, with its equally time-honoured servant and roan-coloured steed.

The Misses Wynton were by no means rich, and attempted no display. Why should they, indeed? Every one knew who they were, and if that one-horse carriage was a trifle antiquated, and did not move on such easy springs as some of its fellows that were bought yesterday, the sisters were fully satisfied with things as they were.

But to Althea, who was not critical about springs, those wide cushions of olive green were the height of luxury and magnificence. She had hardly expected to be important enough to have the carriage sent for her, and the attention touched her, even while it brought a spot of warm, half-nervous colour to her cheeks. It did not cool them either,

when, forgetful of her height, her forehead came in contact with the carriage roof as she stepped inside; and in that moment of humiliation, she wondered if the grave old servant who closed the door would agree with Jack in thinking her a Beanstick.

But no time now to think of Jack, or any of them at the dear old home. A peep of village—a few cottages—several suburban dwellings more or less pretentious—and then in, at a quiet trot, through the gates of Elm-leigh, under the over-arching trees that gave the home its name, and that made the wide carriage-way dim and shadowy, even that midsummer evening.

Althea was broad awake from dreamland now, sharply, intensely conscious of everything—of a light figure at the open hall door, that sprang to meet her as the slow horse stopped, and whispered a delighted welcome as the cousins clung together just a moment; of another figure in the dim distance of the hall, elderly, upright, dignified, that advanced with slow steps to offer greeting; and then Louise, still with her arm round her cousin, drew her gently forward, saying, "Here she is! Dear Aunt Felicia, this is Althea."

It was a trying moment for all three.

Perhaps Miss Wynton had dreaded this meeting as much as the young girl herself; for her prejudiced imagination had predicted nothing but discomfort in the thought of being thrown for the first time in the company of her stranger niece, the music-master's daughter. Never very demonstrative, it was no wonder that her greeting seemed colder even than she intended, and that the first touch of the soft wrinkled hand affected the eager girl as if it had been made of ice.

The effect was indescribable.

Althea's heart had been warming somewhat towards her new relatives since she had seen their carriage waiting for her, and Louise's clinging embrace on the threshold had made it expand still more; but now her faltering greeting died upon her lips, and the sensitive face—a moment before quivering with

mingled feelings—now fell suddenly, as if the light had been extinguished in all its windows.

She was so chilled, so wounded in the moment of entrance, that it changed her whole bearing, almost unconsciously, and she hardly heard or understood the few questions that followed as to her journey, fatigue, and so on. It was well for her that Louise was near to smooth her path, and cover the awkwardness as well as was possible, though Louise, too, was sadly disappointed at the result of this first interview; and she hastened to lead her cousin away to their own room, while Miss Felicia went back to the drawing-room, to mourn afresh over the perversity of her sister in ever caring to quit "that state of life in which it had pleased God to call her."

And Althea, still with that sore heart of hers, passed through the great cool hall and up the broad staircase to the room she was to share with her cousin so long as Louise remained. She only gave it one swift glance in passing, and then went straight to the open window where the June roses were flinging graceful festoons of shade; and then came the first relief she had felt since that oppressive interview.

Althea caught her breath, and the tight feeling at her heart gave way a little under the influence of the scene before her; for there was the dear old garden in which Mamsey and Aunt Eva had spent so many of their earlier days; there were the trim lawns and many patterned flower-beds; and further away were the great elms again, such as she had seen on the other side of the house, now in their full glory of tender leaves; and over all, the low level rays of westering sunlight; and amid all, the good-night song of happy birds.

Louise knew exactly how her cousin was feeling, and left her, as long as she dared, to the healing influence of the sweet sights and sounds, while she busied herself in arranging the traveller's belongings to their mutual comfort; but the warning bell would be ringing soon, and time must not be lost.

"Al, dear," she said then, "it is so good to have you here,

I do not know how to wait till night to have our long talk. I have hundreds of questions I long to ask, about Mamsey and Uncle Roy, and all, but I dare not begin now. You must make haste and change your dress, for they have waited dinner for you; and that is a very great compliment, do you know, in this punctual household. Was it not good of them, old ladies as they are?"

Althea did not answer at once. She did not feel the least hungry just then—for material food at least—but her heart was crying out for the home love she missed for the first time; and she thought to herself, a kiss of genuine welcome would have touched her far more than this expression of it. And when she opened her trunk, and her eye fell upon the things the mother had folded with such tender care, her heart almost failed her. She was very silent, and submitted passively to Louise's swift and loving ministrations; and when she stood at length arrayed in the white dress that had called forth such delight and admiration the evening before, the face was paler than it had been then, and the great eyes had lost their light in a sadder, more pensive mood.

It did not escape Louise for a moment, and it touched and troubled her; she had so longed to get Althea here, and to make her a sharer in such advantages as Elm-leigh afforded; and if only her aunts would take to her, there was no knowing what good might be in store. This first move, however, had been altogether unpropitious, and it made her tremble somewhat for the second.

"Althea," she said, gently, "you must not take things too much to heart—just at first, you know. You are not used to Aunt Felicia yet, and think her cold; but half of it is only her manner, and you will understand her better soon. Believe me, dear, you will be happy here, if you will only try and be your best."

There was no time for reply, for a slight knock was followed immediately by the entrance of Aunt Grace, who came in

somewhat puffed and breathless from the staircase; for, unlike her sister, Miss Grace had a strong tendency to *embonpoint*, and was moreover slightly lame. This physical unlikeness between the sisters was accentuated by the difference in their character and manner; Miss Grace being impulsive and outspoken; Miss Felicia cool and reserved.

"I only just heard that Althea had arrived," she began. "I was in the shrubbery when Daisy came to fetch me in to dinner, so lost no time in breaking the ice, and seeing for myself what the new niece was like. Well, child, how do you do? But, dear me! I shall want a pair of steps to look into your face. You are as tall as a grenadier." And Aunt Grace, still breathing heavily, and leaning on her little silver-headed stick, evidently missed, in her anxious scrutiny, a something she had been half-consciously expecting in the face above her, for the next minute she added, under her breath, "Not a bit like your mother!"

No; the second Althea looked, at that trying moment, as unlike the first, as a house closed and deserted would look to one in happy and welcoming occupation. The sensitive face had drawn down its blinds, and every feature was saying in so many distinct words, "Not at home;" while Miss Grace's broad strong countenance fell instinctively, and a sigh escaped her as she turned away.

Both girls caught the sound, and both misread it. It only locked poor Althea more tightly into her pained sense of being a disappointment, while it stimulated Louise to greater exertions; but neither knew how the heart of the childless woman had been yearning for a sight of the long-lost sister, nor how she had built upon seeing her reproduced in this young daughter of hers.

So the first dinner was a very silent and troubled one to Althea. She was half-conscious of the cool, pleasant room, with its windows open to the summer air—the soft, shaded lamps, the antique silver, and the ripple of talk that went on,

more or less around her, as the servants moved noiselessly about; but she was too tired and bruised now to exert herself to be polite, and while her cousin and Daisy Conway chatted, and made it bright for the old ladies, she was inwardly missing the joyous freedom of home, and wondering how they were all getting on without her.

How strange it was to hear only women's voices everywhere —to have no Jack banging about and whistling shrilly, no Ted with his quaint jokes to set them all off laughing, as people surely only knew how to laugh under the "professor's" roof. How could she exist for a whole month, with such mild small talk as Daisy was making; and would the elderly ladies be horrified if she should ever forget her surroundings and be betrayed into a whistle?

And Althea's eyes wandered from Miss Wynton's high-bred, impassive countenance to that of the other sister, at the lower end of the table; and at the recollection of her brother's warning not to grow like them, an involuntary smile rose to her lips. It was not lost upon the quick-witted Miss Grace, and the arch smile attracted her strangely—it opened one of the windows in that closed house, and gave her the first glimpse of what she had been longing for.

"Louise always plays to her Aunt Felicia after dinner," she said, as they entered the drawing-room; "would you like a stroll round the garden—late though it is—or are you quite ready for bed?"

Althea did not take long to decide. That old garden had been drawing her with magnet-like attraction ever since her arrival; and gladly leaving the drawing-room, where Daisy was already bringing out the cards for a game of cribbage with Miss Wynton, she flew like a bird for her hat, and was waiting eagerly on the gravel walk before the tap of Miss Grace's cane announced the approach of her companion.

It was hard work to have to walk quite slowly, when she was longing to spread her drooping wings and fly down those

dusky vistas, and explore every inch of ground; but difficult as it was to keep her pace down to that of a stout elderly lady, that walk was an "open sesame," and before they returned to the house, Aunt Grace had found the key to one of Althea's heart-chambers, and had had such a peep of Castle Street and its inmates, that it left her with a curious moisture about the eyes.

They had been round the flower-beds, and Althea had been introduced to all the old lady's special favourites—the York and Lancaster roses, the great flowering seringas, and the varieties of garden poppy, that Miss Grace stoutly refused to forego for any more modern specimens of horticulture; and now, after leaving the more cultivated part behind, the two were pausing at the shrubbery gate under the elm branches, and Althea's tongue was running on in artless eloquence, quickened by the genuine sympathy her tale evoked.

It was a faithful home-picture, and Miss Grace forgot the gathering darkness and the falling dew, in the strange interest of the theme; till with a sudden movement she came back to the present, and recollected that there was such a thing as rheumatism in the world.

"Come, my grenadier," she said, in her abrupt fashion, "give me an arm, for I am tired outright, and we must get back to the house. Ah! here comes Louise with a warmer shawl for me. You young people make us forget we were not born yesterday. Now, Louise, ask your cousin how she likes my garden."

But Althea did not even hear the question. Her eyes were on the dim shrubbery walks, and, late as it was, she *must* just enter that enchanted ground. The giant elms above, with their solemn shade; the winding walks beneath, upon which the rising moon cast patches of broken and quivering light—it was a realm of romance that filled her with a strange longing, and yet misgiving, impossible for her to understand.

Miss Grace was being well muffled up from the night air,

and Louise, with a pleased smile at the newly-formed friendship, was leading her away, and looking back for Althea to join them. But the young girl still lingered.

"Aunt Grace, *may* I? Just two minutes? Do not wait for me—I shall be home as soon as you." And pushing open the little rustic door, the tall white figure disappeared within, to the amazement of Miss Grace, who began to feel sundry warning pains about the shoulders, and remarked almost testily—

"She hoped the little simpleton wasn't vapourish."

"Oh no," replied Louise, "she and Ted have a fancy for moonlight; but Mamsey has told her about the shrubbery a thousand times, and I dare say Al could not rest till she had seen it."

So as the tap of the little cane died away on the gravel, Althea stood alone under the elms, in a strange tension of feeling, born of her varied experiences that first day among strangers. She could no more express in words the conflicting moods within her, than we can paint on running water. She knew that she dreaded meeting Miss Wynton's cold eyes again; that she turned instinctively for the mother-love that she missed that night for the first time, and failing that, that the trees seemed to understand, somehow, better even than Louise.

That was the uppermost, the most conscious feeling; what the deeper one was is hardly translatable in syllabled words. If you are in harmony with Nature, perhaps you will understand; otherwise, it is useless to explain. For she is reserved, this great silent mother Nature, and will not unfold herself to everybody. People rush to her, after the dissipation of a London season, and boast, on their return to town, of the delights of the country; but it is not to such as these that Nature gives her best. She has a language for those who can learn it, and a voice of music for ears that are sensitive enough to hear it; and pictures—oh, such healing, restful pictures for pure and

seeing eyes. But there are so many eyes that are blind and dense, like Peter Bell's—

> "A primrose by the river's brim,
> A yellow primrose was to him,
> And it was nothing more."

This girl was too young yet to know much of Nature's healing power, she was seldom weary enough to feel the need of rest; but already in her bright youth Nature had a voice for her, and to-night the trees seemed to whisper something that the river at home had been murmuring of late—a continuation, as it were, of what the old poems sang, but in so dim and subtle a way she only half understood its meaning.

Althea was not afraid of ghosts, and yet in the moonlight she hardly felt alone. The little wood seemed peopled with the spirits of departed Wyntons, who had once wandered here as she was doing now; and the same old trees that had sheltered them in their varied lives of joy and sorrow seemed to murmur over her words of welcome, of soothing, and of hope.

She never afterwards forgot that quiet five minutes under the moonlit elms. It seemed to her definitely to divide her life, and teach her that the little world of home was not all; that as others had had to face their destiny, live out their little span, and lay down again the gift of life, while the old trees lived calmly on—so would she. She could not always go on living a child's life under a mother's care. Life would not go on just drifting; it would have to be faced, chosen, and *managed*, and she, like every other woman, must depend on herself.

But if solemnized, Althea was no longer bruised and pained, but braced and strengthened to meet the future; and recollecting her promise to Miss Grace, she repassed the little gate, and bounded with swift steps to the lighted hall.

CHAPTER V.

AN EQUESTRIENNE.

"She is so strange."
LONGFELLOW.

"I hate the crowded town!
I cannot breathe shut up within its gates!
Air—I want air, and sunshine, and blue sky,
The feelings of the breeze upon my face,
The feelings of the turf beneath my feet;
Then I am free and strong—once more myself."
Spanish Student.

MISS GRACE need not have been afraid, because Althea had enjoyed those five minutes all by herself in the moonlight, that she had a morbid, vapourish young lady to deal with; and so she felt next day when they were rolling along towards the station in the old-fashioned chariot, bound on a very important errand indeed, no less a one than the quest of wedding gear, and Althea's tongue went as fast as any that lovely June morning.

Miss Grace had the three young people in charge, and any qualms she might have about fatigue and so forth were considerably lessened by the knowledge that Frank Conway was to meet them after the business of shopping was over, and to take Althea (and the others if they so chose) to the Academy, before returning with them to the quiet of Elmleigh.

Louise was calm and tranquil as usual; her shopping arrangements were trifling to-day, for the virginal white robe

in which she was to pass into her new existence was all safe and ready at home, and she had ample leisure to bestow on her two bridesmaids in the crisis of choosing their attire.

Althea, refreshed and invigorated by a sound night's sleep, was in one of her most joyous moods to-day, starting forth as she was into the great world of London, with no care or responsibility of her own; for, as to her dress, she had no particular wish about it so that it pleased Louise, and Louise would arrange it all for her.

The other bridesmaid, a fair, innocent-looking little creature, was far less tranquil, and consumed the short journey in private arrangements for her own advantage; for Daisy Conway — usually winning and obliging — could be very determined on important points such as this, and when the question was one of attire, had a wonderful knack of gaining her own ends, though in the most polite way in the world.

It was to be a very quiet wedding, with only two bridesmaids; the intended third had been obliged to leave England for a while in search of health. All the more imperative, therefore, to Miss Conway's mind, that the remaining two should be dressed alike; and the extreme contrast between herself and the newly-arrived guest had upset her calculations as to the same style harmonizing with each. However, if one had to yield to the other, Daisy was determined it should not be herself, though she was in some trepidation about Louise, and the power she might put forward in the matter. So Althea, all unconscious of these dark designs, chatted brightly on, and enjoyed everything to her heart's content; so much so, indeed, that Miss Grace took back another great piece of her prejudice of yesterday, and more than once found herself listening to the joyous laugh with a strange wistfulness—it so recalled the sunny presence that had left Elm-leigh for ever.

The crowded streets were a mystery that checked the flow of Althea's tongue, and the great West End shops overawed her completely, so that she became an easy victim to Miss

Conway's wiles, and was quite ready to accept whatever the others decided for her, without an idea of its being becoming or otherwise.

Their positions were reversed now, and it was Althea who had become silent and subdued, while Daisy fought her battle, and planned and arranged with quite unnecessary eagerness. Althea began to feel tired and exhausted in the heat and bustle of the shop, where the roar of the mighty Babylon reached them in partially subdued waves of sound, and it was an immense relief when the long business was at length despatched, though Louise's brow wore a slight cloud of disappointment at the result. The diaphanous robe, upon which Miss Conway had insisted, would be perfection for Daisy's own fairy-like little figure; but how would it, and the tint of ethereal blue, grace the imperfectly developed outlines of her companion? Louise had an uneasy feeling for a little while that Althea had not been considered enough, and that she had been weak not to manage better for her; but in the natural interest of meeting the one who was so soon to be her husband, all anxieties on that score were soon forgotten.

It was a wonderful day for one at least of that little party, who, incredible as it may seem, had lived all her life within a hundred miles of the greatest city in the world, and had only seen it through the medium of books and imagination.

Her heart was as plastic as wax to receive the impressions and images that crowded upon her so overwhelmingly; and after meeting with Frank, and lunching at a neighbouring restaurant, Miss Grace ensconced herself in the very first gallery of the Academy, declaring she was too jaded to go a step further, and would wait while the others made the round.

I am afraid Althea behaved very badly, and made it a little difficult for her party; for while Louise and her lover led the way, glancing from catalogue to picture, and lingering here and there before a favourite, as fancy dictated, it was only natural that, under the circumstances, pictures should not

wholly engross them. Just as it was natural, too, that Frank's sister behind, who had no such claim on her attention at that moment, should be able to give it devotedly to the matter in hand, and to study her catalogue as if she were preparing for an examination. Daisy was a sensible young woman, as may no doubt be perceived ere this. "One thing at a time" was her motto, and now the paramount business of the morning was settled, she had full leisure to bestow on that of the afternoon; for did not pictures make good subject for conversation at dinner-time? and did not dear Miss Felicia always like to hear about them, although she rarely went to town herself?

Miss Conway was not a bit afraid of the old ladies; she had such a pretty way of devoting herself to them, and of turning off the somewhat sharp edges of Miss Grace's remarks. But Miss Wynton was her prime favourite—dear Miss Felicia, who never said biting things, and who had several mutual interests with Daisy herself.

But Althea had not made the round of picture galleries every year, like her companion, and some allowance must be made for novelty, Daisy knew; so she waited patiently, and retraced her steps from time to time to fetch the laggard, until it began to grow tiresome at last. Althea did not heed the catalogue at all, and passed some pictures with only a glance, while before others she remained rooted to the spot in a most exasperating fashion for those behind, for whom the tall figure sadly obstructed the view. Besides, among all these elegant robes, it must be confessed Althea's homely garments had a decidedly country cut, and Daisy did not care to have them brought into such prominent relief; so it was well for her peace of mind that Louise, turning at the moment, saw the cloud on her brow, and with a woman's quick perceptions divined what was amiss.

"Look at Althea," she said, laughing; "she is quite lost to all around, and is getting in everybody's way. Go and take care of her, Frank, while Daisy and I make our way back to

Aunt Grace; but give dear Al as much time as possible, for she *is* enjoying it so."

So Frank's light touch on her arm brought Althea's eyes to his amused face, and her thoughts to present surroundings.

"I need not ask if you are happy," he said; "but I am like a great lumbering wherry, sent out under orders to take this little pinnace in tow that is getting itself and other vessels aground. Now tell me where your thoughts were, to forget us all in this fashion."

Althea looked very repentant, and apologized hastily. "I was only thinking," she murmured almost inaudibly, "how I wished Ted (my brother Edmund, you know) were with me then. We have read all about 'Andromache' together, and it is so strange to see a modern reproduction of her. And—I wanted my mother too. It is so sad to be having all these good things without them."

Her companion turned to look more closely than he had yet done at the face beside him. It looked so youthful a one to be on such familiar terms with Andromache, and yet the last little whispered words had far more of the child than the Blue Stocking in them. It was so different to what Louise, or Daisy would have said, that at first he had no reply ready; and, indeed, he was not quite sure on the instant as to Andromache's exact identity, except that she figured somewhere in the annals of Troy.

"Well," he said very gently, "do not let me spoil your pleasure, or hurry you on faster than you wish to go; and if you see any more of your friends upon the walls, I should like to be introduced to them. We can have a good half-hour yet before we join Miss Grace."

So they passed happily on together, Frank waiting just where she wanted, and only suggesting a move by his light touch when they unduly blocked the way. And as Althea recognized one "friend" after another, and, forgetful of all around, criticized and admired in her eager, ardent fashion,

Mr. Conway began to feel he had not done the Academy justice hitherto, and that the little country girl was a pleasant cicerone, if not a competent art critic.

The half-hour passed very quickly, and the two faces were so bright and animated when they rejoined their party that they brought fresh animation to the three waiting ones, who had begun to get a little weary; and Aunt Grace, as she rose painfully from the luxurious settee, remarked, with a smile—

"Now, my grenadier, I want your arm. I need not ask if *you* have enjoyed the pictures—your face speaks for you."

They were all rather tired on the short journey home, and Aunt Grace's mouth kept slipping open, as it relaxed in slumber ever and anon, and closed with a start as she returned to consciousness; while Althea, now that the excitement was over, became aware, for the first time, that she was very weary, and that it would be far nicer to be left alone than to be cross-questioned by Miss Conway about the pictures.

For Daisy's catalogue, crossed and recrossed with pencil-marks to help her memory, was a veritable trap for the unwary, and for those who, like Althea, wandered through the galleries for pure love, with no ulterior views. It grew quite wearisome and dispiriting at last, to find how utterly ignorant she was, not only of the names of the artists, but even of their productions; and, for the second time that day, Althea found how much she had to learn.

The drive home in the fresher air was a relief after the bustle and noise, and the dear fields and hedgerows looked like old and tried friends, welcoming her back after a long absence. Althea did not realize that bodily exhaustion had something to do with this strange new depression, for that first luncheon at the great restaurant had been rather one of the wonderful sights to her than a tangible reality; and now, as they turned slowly in at the gates, she felt as if she would give a year of her life for one brief rush into the fields, before sitting down under Miss Wynton's eyes at a long dinner.

"Well, Rawlings," exclaimed Aunt Grace, as the old coachman let down the steps for her careful and ponderous descent, "it is nice to go out, but it is nicer to come home; that is what I always feel after a day in town. Now, girls, you have just fifteen minutes before dinner; make haste with your preparations, for we must be punctual to-night."

So Aunt Grace, a little lamer and heavier than usual, took her slow way upstairs, accompanied by Louise with the light wraps. Miss Conway ran off to the drawing-room to tell Miss Wynton about the day's doings; and Frank disappeared through the garden door, for the flowers his *fiancée* always loved to have from his hands when he joined the party. Althea could not follow him there, much as she longed for a breath of air; so, feeling sure that fifteen minutes would be more than enough time for her, she sat down in the wide, cool hall to rest.

How pleasant it was—the great, old-fashioned entrance, with its antique, oaken furniture, and wide window-seats, and pots of fragrant flowers. A huge bowl of dog-roses brightened the deep shadow of one old chest, and from another came the faint, subtle odour of dried rose-leaves, while the afternoon rays touched into greater relief the dim pictures on the eastern wall, and the Wynton arms shone out more vividly from their sombre frame.

Althea lingered a minute before that last frame, with quite a new interest. It was familiar to her, of course, for the crest was the one she had always seen on the letters that came to Louise, and the small portion of silver that belonged to her mother bore the same device. It was curious to her, now that for a few short weeks she formed a part of this so different life, to think that *she*, too, had a share—even if unrecognized—in that family history.

But in a deep elbow of shade, purposely in as much retirement as possible, was another family record, that touched Althea more than the armorial bearings, or touched her, at

least, in a totally different way. It was the great rocking-horse, with its fiery eye and flowing mane, that Mamsey had never ceased to covet for her little ones, and accounts of which, and the dashing rides she and Eva had enjoyed upon it, had often made wistfully bright the sympathetic eyes of her own boys and girls.

Here he was, as much in the flesh as a proud wooden steed can ever be—that hero of a hundred fights, according to Mamsey's glowing tales. How Althea loved him that moment; and though in childish days she had yearned to possess him, to rival Aunt Eva's prowess with Ted and Jack, the sentiment he awoke in her breast just then was something deeper far.

For he was a bit of *home*, a link with the dear and sacred past, that could never come back to the two who had once known him so well. And oh! since he was never removed from the old hall, must it not be because Aunt Felicia and Aunt Grace felt something of this, too, and loved the painted steed for the sake of those who were gone?

Althea stooped and pressed a furtive kiss on the gallant neck; and then (oh, *poor* Althea!) she must just try the saddle, to tell Mamsey about it afterwards; and then, once started, there was a strange, wild pleasure in the rapid motion, so long as she felt sure, as she did then, of being quite unperceived. For they were all busy dressing upstairs—all but Mr. Conway; and she could command the garden door, and have time to escape before he came in. Dinner was laid, she had seen, so there would be no servant coming for a minute or two; and visitors at the front door, far at her back, would have to make their presence known by a knock. So for just one minute she might throw off, in that way, the sense of restraint and longing for freedom that had begun to oppress her again; she would keep it all to herself, and tell no one till she got home. No one would understand *here;* but at home they all knew that she had not parted with her dear old doll till she was nearly fifteen, and that she could never pass a swing even now without an

effort to get a flight through rushing air, as in childish days. It was cruelly hard for her that at that moment, when the fiery steed was at the full extent of his rockers, and Althea was just thinking a real live hunter would fill her cup of earthly joy, with nothing else to wish for, the front door opened abruptly, and the new-comer stood transfixed on the threshold.

Coming out of the light as he did into sudden shadow, and catching sight of the flying figure in the deeper gloom, his first impulse was to raise an alarm, as confused ideas of a Mazeppa, a circus-girl, an escaped patient from Hanwell, flitted wildly across his brain in bewildering succession. The latter conclusion seemed to predominate, however; and, checking an involuntary cry, he was on the point of hastening to lay a firm hand on the poor deluded creature, when Althea sprang from her warlike steed, and faced the stranger for the first time.

No explanation was possible in the agony of shame that sent the blood rushing to her cheeks, and something almost like tears to her great lustrous eyes. Her only hope was that the stranger's business was brief, and that she would not have to see him again; so with a low and formal inclination, and an almost inaudible murmur about calling Miss Wynton, Althea passed swiftly from his sight, just as Frank Conway arrived on the scene.

She dared not tell her cousin then, much as she longed for sympathy; so only asked, rather excitedly, as she entered her room—

"Louise, who can that man be who opens the door as if the place belongs to him, startling people out of their senses in this way?" while Louise turned round from the mirror, to cast a perplexed glance from under the wavy masses of fair hair, that almost concealed her face.

"Man?" she ejaculated, pausing a moment from her swift brushing; "there is no man here that I know of, but Frank —except, indeed, old Rawlings! Whom *can* you mean, Althea?"

"A young man; a gentleman, I suppose, though I hardly looked at him. He is talking with Mr. Conway now. I heard them go to his dressing-room together."

A light dawned in Louise's face, as she resumed her hair-dressing.

"Then it must be Andrew—Mr. Valender," she said, with a smile of pleasure; "but we did not know he had returned to England, and thought he could not be here for two or three days yet. How glad Frank will be—and Daisy, too!" the last remark half under her breath. "But come, Al, you keep me on tenterhooks about being ready, and you have not a moment to lose!"

"But will he stay to dinner?" asked Althea, with a great qualm at her heart.

"To dinner? Of course he will! And perhaps to sleep, for he is an immense favourite of Aunt Felicia's, and comes and goes as he will. He is to be Frank's groomsman at our wedding next week, and his sister Mildred was to have been my other bridesmaid; but she was so ill they had to take her to Madeira for two or three months. Now, Althea, when you are ready I will answer all your questions, but not till then."

So there was nothing for it but to submit, though Althea longed to escape her trials by going to bed at once; she was so silent while dressing that Louise forgot her prohibition, and sought to remove her cousin's fancied shyness by more details.

"Did I ever tell you, Al, that Aunt Felicia was near being Mrs. Valender, ages ago? This boy's father and she were engaged for a time, but some foolish quarrel or mistake came between them, and was never set right again. Mr. Valender did not marry for many years after that, and died soon after; and his only son—Andrew—has always been like a relative to Aunt Felicia, and rules her almost as he will. We fancy Daisy and he will one day be very dear to each other, from little things we have seen; Aunt Felicia thinks so, and so does Frank."

"Louise," cried a soft voice outside, and following the gentle tap came Daisy, as fresh as one of her own name-blossoms, with a little flush on her cheeks, and a bright, half-conscious light in her happy eyes. "Louise, have you heard the news that Mr. Valender is come? He saw the carriage a mile ahead, but determined to surprise us, so went quietly round and put his horse up before coming to the house. But see, I have brought a rose for Althea, for I knew *you* would be provided, without thought of ours."

And Daisy looked so sweet as she stood stretching up her fair, round arms, to fasten the flowers in Althea's dress—her fingers trembling in an unusual manner—that it was no wonder Louise stooped and kissed her, with a sense of fellow-feeling.

Althea needed the rose, she plainly felt as she caught a glimpse of herself in passing at the sound of the gong. Her nocturnal rambles of the evening before had left her dress limp and raggy-looking, and an unlucky smirch on one side betrayed the inadvisability of a too close acquaintance with the elm trees—in a white dress at least. Her own folly was coming home to her in a thousand ways, and as she followed her two companions in their soft, fresh attire, she would have given much to be at home in Castle Street—for that one evening, at any rate.

CHAPTER VI.

SUNSET THOUGHTS.

"Grown too wise
For fleeting joys of Love? Nay, Love is Youth,
And still the world is Young."

LEWIS MORRIS.

THE drawing-room hearth was quite a scene of animation as the three girls entered together. Althea had never seen Miss Wynton look so bright and happy as she did now, and in the midst of the gay laughter, Louise and Daisy advanced to add their quota to the general greeting of the newly arrived; and as Daisy's small pink fingers met his in a moment's clasp, the old lady's glance was even tender, as it lingered on the two.

Althea was only too rejoiced to be forgotten for an instant, for her heart was beating painfully, now the inevitable meeting had come. To be exposed to the amazed surprise of the whole party would be almost more than she could bear; and should her ridiculous escapade be brought to their knowledge, she feared even Louise's forbearance would hardly be proof against it. So that when the introduction at last took place, her cheeks were burning like coals of fire; she did not even dare to raise her eyes, and, in mortal dread of some playful allusion to their recent meeting, her curtsey was so profound and formal that it looked almost absurd, and Miss Wynton, with a marked change of manner, gave the signal for an adjournment to dinner.

It was only what she had expected—a succession of *gaucheries;* but it was trying, especially when they made such a pleasant harmonious little set without the stranger niece. And of course Althea felt it all as plainly as if it were written on the wall before her eyes, and it did not tend to make her embarrassment less. So she left them to talk as they would, and only listened vaguely to the bright and pleasant chat.

Miss Wynton had many questions to ask about the invalid, the climate, surroundings, voyage, and so on; but her young favourite did not exert himself to gratify her. Over-exertion, in any shape or form, indeed, did not seem one of Andrew Valender's characteristics; and this first evening, at all events, he allowed them all to amuse him, without feeling any particular need to do anything in return. Why should he, he might almost ask himself? Leaning comfortably back, as he was doing now—one hand resting negligently on Conway's chair, while with the other he toyed with strawberries and cream—why should he exert himself to be entertaining? Could the old ladies love him better than they did, if he went on his knees to do them service? One of them at least seemed to think the more of him the more he exacted from her; and the young ones——. Andrew raised his sleepy grey eyes for an instant, and was happily satisfied with his lot.

It was just delightful to be back at Elm-leigh. The love and welcome he ever met there, made it home to him—far more than his mother's abode, and infinitely more than those dull bachelor chambers in a dull London street. It was he who had introduced Conway here a year ago—dear old Conway, who doted on him as much as the women did; and why, Andrew had not the faintest idea.

But, meanwhile, Daisy was reaping the reward of her morning's diligence at the Academy, and the extent of her information about art and artists was wonderful. Having sent for her catalogue, she was soon in her element, and the fair

animated face could hardly have had a better foil than the dark shadowy one opposite, where Althea sat listening in constrained silence to the playful banter; for Andrew, too, had some knowlege of art, and roused himself more than he had yet done, to answer his little neighbour. Just once Daisy's memory failed her, and then her brother remarked, in his pleasant way—

"I think we have an authority here at my side, who could enlighten us a great deal. Any way, if Miss Holmes and I can't descant upon perspective and other technicalities, I am sure we both enjoyed the pictures as much as anybody who has ever seen them; and I, for one, had quite a new insight into some of them. Tell them what you told me about the 'Andromeda,' will you, Miss Holmes?"

The little start with which Althea suddenly found that the eyes of the whole table were upon her, was covered now by her friend's lucky mistake; and glancing up with an arch look in her great brown eyes, she replied—

"The *Andromache*, if you please, Mr. Conway! I'm afraid it does not say much for the 'insight' you say you gained from me, if your ideas are still so hazy. We have much to learn besides perspective."

Frank's little comic gesture of confusion at having the general laugh against him, was amusing to see, as he sprang to open the door for Miss Wynton. He did not look as if he minded at all, though, for his object was gained in setting Althea more at her ease; and the grateful look Louise gave him in passing, was reward enough for the present, and promised more by-and-by.

And in the few minutes that ensued before Frank and his friend followed the ladies to the drawing-room, he must have done something more to remove the young man's prejudice; for, indeed, Mr. Valender's first amazement had given place to an indifference almost bordering on contempt for the unformed maiden, who was so manifestly out of her element,

and whose greeting of himself would have seemed almost rude in its studied coldness, but that the poor nervous thing evidently knew no better.

So, when Miss Grace called for her niece to take their usual evening stroll round the flower-beds, and the two so-different figures passed out of the open French window together, just as the young men entered the room, Andrew Valender felt a momentary vexation, and he stood for half a minute watching the tall, slight figure, in its white, clinging draperies, on which the stout old lady leaned so contentedly, and felt he would have liked to speak to her before riding away.

He felt glad, somehow, that moment, that he had told no one—not even Conway—of the ludicrous manner in which he had first made her acquaintance. It was just as well she should not be teazed, so, at least, he would give no one the chance of doing it but himself; and if she had any mettle in her, as Conway seemed to think, it would be rather fun to have the whip-hand of her in this way, and hold over her the playful lash of a troublesome secret.

There was no music to-night, except the good-night twitter of the birds in the old trees outside; and when Frank and Louise had strolled together into the summer air, and Daisy was hesitatingly bringing forward the cards, Andrew put out his hand in his cool fashion, as he hung negligently over Miss Wynton's chair, and deliberately secured the board.

"Cousin Felicitas," he remarked (using the name he had long ago given her, in one of his merry moods), "it is far too lovely an evening to waste over *fifteen twos* and *fifteen fours;* and I am going to take you out in the wake of the others, before I go to fetch Jess. Daisy wants some fresh air after her long day in town. I vote that we have a stroll."

Of course he had his way; and Miss Wynton, who always liked her armchair after dinner, was led forth triumphantly in her garden-hood, with feeble remonstrances at her naughty boy's wilfulness. But she only took a few turns in the broad

walk, and soon returned to the house, leaving her young friends to finish their ramble without her.

And Althea, as she and Aunt Grace pursued their rounds, caught glimpses of Louise clinging to her lover's arm, while he bent low to talk to her as they strolled along; and, again, of another pair of figures disappearing among the trees—Daisy's broad hat and blue ribbons making a pretty spot of colour against the grey shooting-jacket in which Mr. Valender had ridden from town: and it reminded her somehow of the old poems she and Edmund had read together.

A half sigh followed the thought—she did not the least know why,—perhaps, because it seemed so long since she had seen dear old Ted, and that it would be nice to have him just now, to lead her off like those others, farther than Aunt Grace cared to follow.

For the old poems were no closed book of the past. They were being written every day, even now, *to-day*—in the bird-music; in the sunset clouds; in those glowing canvases from which her favourite heroes had leaned to greet her; above all, in those softly strolling figures among the trees, with whom the shadowy form of Love was surely walking.

How true it is that we live in different worlds, though side by side; for while Aunt Grace snipped perseveringly among the withered blossoms of her York and Lancaster rose bushes, remarking that she was glad she had put on her clogs, and that her companion had better go and do the same, Althea was coming back from her reverie to feel she was rather tired, and that Aunt Grace leaned more heavily than was quite comfortable for one so much above her in stature.

"Here they are!" cried a cheerful voice that made both Aunt Grace and Althea suddenly upright, and aware of what the soft grass of the alley had prevented their hearing.

"Miss Grace," said Andrew, "I want to introduce you to a young lady of my acquaintance that you cannot fail

to admire; that is, if you have the least taste or discernment."

And while the old lady's eyes involuntarily sought Daisy, the latter, with a faint rose colour, quietly put in—

"It is the little mare, Mr. Valender means—his recent purchase; and he wants us to go and see her in her box before he starts."

"And Miss Holmes?" queried Andrew, seeing Althea hesitate, doubtful if she were included, "will *she* honour Jess with a visit of ceremony? But I am sure she will; the dumb creatures know who love them, by instinct."

"But how do you know that Miss Holmes loves them?" asked Daisy quickly, with a not unnatural surprise; but Andrew vouchsafed no further explanation than the remark—

"Perhaps it is instinct in *my* case, like the brutes; but I feel as persuaded Miss Holmes is a born equestrienne, as if I had seen her at full gallop."

Althea had not a word to say for herself, except, indeed, by the involuntary eloquence of the brown eyes, as they were lifted swiftly to the speaker's face. He seemed to read, however, something half-resentful, half-imploring in the sudden glance, for his own, which had looked so lazy at dinner time, so mischievous a moment ago, had quite a new expression now, and one that became them well.

She could not have described what that changed expression was. If their dancing light recalled her brother Jack in his most bantering moods, the sudden gentleness of the altered look was more like Edmund at his very best; and it soothed and reassured her, and made her feel that Daisy's friend was not a conceited egotist after all.

And then Andrew gave his arm to Miss Grace, and the two girls fell behind, one of them beginning to see, for the first time, that the face she had thought superciliously handsome, from the furtive glimpse she had taken of it across the dinner-table, was interesting in its way; that it had something

besides large grey eyes, a well-bridged, prominent nose, and a long fair moustache,—something—were it only an occasional expression that chased away the lazy indifference like the mists before the sun.

Pretty Jess had quite a reception that evening at the half-door of her box, for Frank and Louise were there when the others came up, and it was late before the young master could tear himself away from the friendly group, and ride off in the evening grey. He looked well on horseback, and as he bared his head a moment at parting, Daisy might be forgiven the shadow that crossed her bright face as she turned away.

"I wish he were only half as fond of his books as he is of Jess," was Miss Grace's comment, as Phelps unfastened her clogs in the hall; but Althea thought they must not be hard on him. It was natural he should like the bounding, flying motion, and besides, was not Jess the link between him and Daisy? The old poems were quite right; musty law books were not the one thing in life. And Louise and Daisy—"Well," thought Althea, as with a half sigh she ascended the broad stairs to bed, "Well, they were quite right too."

CHAPTER VII.

THE OLD BROCADE.

"Never man rejoiced
More than Geraint to greet her thus attired;
And glancing all at once as keenly at her
As careful robins eye the delver's toil,
Made her cheek burn, and either eyelid fall,
But rested with her sweet face satisfied."

Geraint and Enid.

THE action of time upon the human heart is something like that of the surf upon the limestone crags, wearing down the sharpest and keenest edges in its ceaseless operations. Not alone in great and momentous things is this perceptible, but in the quiet current of everyday life. We find continually that the impressions, so vivid, perhaps, but yesterday, are softening down to-day, simply by the ceaseless action of succeeding influences.

Before the end of the first week, Castle Street was receding just a little in Althea's mental vision. As Elm-leigh and its inmates grew more familiar, and the first strangeness wore off, it was natural that home and its concerns should lose their first painfully intense interest; and though a letter from Mamsey or Ted was enough to bring a rush of fond memories, she did not miss them so acutely as in those first two days. The old life was indeed by no means forgotten—its roots had struck too deeply in her very being; but the new life, grafted upon the old, was beginning to put forth leaves, and to make

its presence felt in a subtle way she could not in the least have explained.

Althea thought sometimes of her rash promise to her brother to come back just as she went, and with the recollection came always an involuntary sigh. Was she changing, being spoilt, as the boys called it, by Elm-leigh life and ways, or what was it that made them seem sweeter, more natural, than on that first forlorn evening when she had longed so for her mother's good-night kiss? Yes, more natural, that was the strange fact. Althea was not really a shy girl, and now that she was less in awe of the one relative, and perfectly at home with the other, she was no longer silent and reserved, and her voice was growing a very familiar one in the family gathering. It was not that that was strange; but, rather, that in some mysterious way, the element in which she found herself was not new at all. It was more like a return to a former sphere from which she had long been severed.

The little house in which she had been reared had never been sordid or mean, it is true; Mamsey's instincts had effectually preserved it from that, and she had the way some rare women possess, of throwing a halo round the most unpromising surroundings. Still, Mamsey's tact and influence could not remove mountains, or make dull Castle Street a reflection of her early home; and this young daughter of hers was absorbing the greater refinement of her present environment in deep draughts. To a nature like hers, soft and impressionable to a degree, things meant so much more than their mere uses. It was not the vulgar pleasure of being more fashionable; it was that the soft tread of the Turkey carpet beneath her feet, and the harmonious tints of hangings and draperies, and the dim, cool shade of the great hall, touched a chord within, just in the same way as did the elms yonder, or the dear river at home, with its sunny reaches and quivering pollards.

Louise came upon her one day in a pensive mood, in the

dining-room, standing in the middle of the floor, doing nothing at all. Laughingly, Louise asked the subject of her meditation; the girl flushed, and said stammeringly—

"I do love this carpet, the very touch is pleasant, just like the look. But, Louise, it is old, and even faded. I was wondering how it was it looks so different to ours at home; ours is very faded too, but as unlike this as——"

"As Turkey to Kidderminster," replied Louise, laughing. But a quick sigh followed the laugh, and encircling Althea's waist with her fond arm, she drew her to the mantelpiece, and pointing to a small miniature that hung above it among several others, she remarked, "Look, Al, that is our great grandmother in the days of her youth; old Madam Wynton, as she was afterwards called. Is it not strange that we all—Aunt Felicia and Mamsey, and you and I—each one of us—has her part in that strong, proud little face? How little she thought of *us*, when she sat for that."

Althea took a long look at the bonny, self-reliant face, with its dimpling chin, and coronet of curls, and fair peach-like skin. She thought she saw suggestions of some of the present generation lying half hidden there; and seeing the intent look, Louise asked, almost wistfully—

"You do not wonder quite so much at my loving Elmleigh now, do you, Al?"

Althea shook her head, and thought with quite a new compunction of how she had mentally condemned her cousin in past days for caring so much for it; contrasting it with her own independence of ideas, to her great self-gratulation.

And now, how could she boast of independence any more, or breathe another scornful word about the "Wynton alms?" For Althea had found among her new experiences, that a smirched and limp white frock had a miserable power to spoil an otherwise happy evening; and after the first rush of colour at Miss Grace's slipping a bit of crisp paper into her hand next time she went to town (with the somewhat brusque

injunction to let Louise do the shopping), Althea had found the pleasantness exceed the pain.

Louise was delighted with the commission, and there was margin enough left, after the principal purchase, to add in sundry little ways to Althea's future comfort. It was wonderful to herself how great the comfort was simply to be in harmony with her surroundings; and as she passed downstairs the first time, in her pretty new evening dress, and the thought of her promise to her brother came rushing back almost like an accusation, a sigh rose, all unbidden, and she said to herself, "Ah! well, I promised more than I could perform—more than anybody could perform; for no one can change their surroundings and remain just the same. Even the poets tell us, 'We are a part of all that we have met.'"

Full of these graver thoughts, Althea forgot the new gown at the moment of entrance, and was as little perturbed or self-conscious as if it were the most natural thing in the world; and involuntarily Miss Wynton's face softened as she made room for her beside herself. In the new atmosphere of pleasant approbation, the girl forgot every fear, and took her place from that moment on a different footing.

For they were getting to know her better, and to be less astonished at the originalities that made her unlike any other girl they knew; and if they could not fathom some of her peculiarities, they began to recognize that they were just part of Althea, and might be trusted, if not traced.

The young fresh nature—so quick to enjoy, so keen in its appreciation—could not but be refreshing to older womanhood; and Miss Wynton grew quite to look forward to the sight of the brown sparkling eyes, on the return of the young people from any short expedition. Once, on her way downstairs, she was amused to come upon Althea at the wide staircase window, both elbows resting on the sill, so lost in thought, that she never noticed the old lady, till a touch on the shoulder brought her face round, with a start.

"What brown study is it now, Althea?"

"Oh, Aunt Felicia," was the quick reply, with a long-drawn breath, "it is *so beautiful!*"

"Why, child, it seems to me that all is beautiful to you. The garden is pleasant enough, I well know; but perhaps from association as much as anything, which is wanting in your case. You make me feel as if I had not taken enough out of it as yet."

"Ah, but——" cried Althea, quickly, and stopped there. Then resumed in a quicker tone, "It is so different to looking out on a dull, ugly, uninteresting street. Perhaps that has trained me by force of contrast."

"But even the London streets have their charm for you, from all I hear. Not West End shops alone, but crowded thoroughfares, that make me shudder to think of entering. Mr. Conway said you found those beautiful, too."

"Ah, but quite a different beauty! Only the wonder, and almost the *awe* of being one in such a tide; but I can't put it into words, Aunt Felicia," said Althea, breaking off suddenly in the stream of her meditation. "It is hard to explain how it is; but to me, who have seen so little, it is *all* beautiful."

It was vague certainly, but a compliment however involuntary, and Miss Wynton was touched. Many things in the girl had begun to recall the sister of long ago, and after a moment's pause, she said gently, "Well, whatever you may have missed, you have a great power of enjoyment, when the opportunity comes. Make the most of it while you are young, before your troubles come; for the sun will not always shine for you in the way it does to-day."

And Miss Wynton's words were true even in a metaphorical sense, which she had not implied; there were sundry breaks, even now, in the more genial atmosphere of Elm-leigh life, when the smiling sun hid his face, and leaden sky appeared.

That unlucky morning, for instance, when Althea, in a distant corner, with her book on her lap, and her ears deaf to

all the conversation around, had been roused at last by Frank Conway's remarking—

"Let us hear Althea's opinion! Now, Althea, what do *you* think of Beaconsfield?"

And the girl, raising almost unseeing eyes from the page that absorbed her, had flung out without a thought, the first reply that rose to her lips. "Think of him? That he was a regular humbug," and returned at once to her book.

There was an instant's terrible calm. The foolish little pellet had fallen like a bombshell among them; and while Althea's audacity rendered Miss Wynton speechless and bridling with indignation, Daisy flushed and astonished, and Louise almost tearful, it could not escape them that the newspaper that Frank had raised suddenly, as a shield to his tell-tale countenance, was shaking in a curious manner; and Miss Grace broke out irritably—

"Don't laugh at her, Frank! Such remarks are so childish that it is a pity they cannot be corrected by a child's punishment; but Althea has outgrown schoolroom days, if not schoolroom manners."

The face of the culprit herself was a study, as the extent of the enormity began to come home to her, and the first bewilderment was giving place to mingled mischief and contrition; but as she looked from one disturbed countenance to another, uncertain what to do, Louise's distressed voice fell on her ear.

"Aunt Grace, pray, pray excuse her—it was very foolish, but she did not mean to be rude. She does not know anything about Beaconsfield; but those silly boys have imbued her with all sorts of wild notions, since Edmund joined a Debating Society last winter. Althea, speak for yourself and say you are sorry."

It was hard, certainly. After those splendid speeches Ted had made at home, when practising for the debate—when the "professor" had put down his Shakespeare to cry, "Oh! oh!"

and even to hiss, sometimes; while she and Jack had applauded to such a degree that the young orator, who had begun as a moderate Liberal, had been carried on the tide of their enthusiasm till he ended his harangue as a Red Republican —it was hard to take back her words and to hear Edmund spoken of as almost a noodle. That was not the way at dear old Castle Street, where everybody was allowed a fair hearing, and where the little drawing-room had often rung with laughter, as Ted and his father fought their battles. Althea and Jack, whose ignorance of politics about equalled their eagerness to enter the arena, would join enthusiastically in the discussion; while the mother, the most ignorant of them all, often laid down her sewing to enjoy the fun as much as either of the youngsters, though she was always careful to maintain a strict neutrality.

Well, the difference between Elm-leigh and Castle Street was making itself manifest in a variety of ways, and this phase of it was as peculiar as the distinction between the Turkey and Kidderminster carpets, only this time the advantage was entirely reversed. Althea was so long coming to the point at issue, that Louise had again to appeal to her. That silence half impressed Miss Wynton as obstinacy, and when it was at last broken, instead of the ample atonement she felt due to her, all that the culprit could find in her conscience to say was, "I beg your pardon—everybody's pardon—if what I said sounded rude. I did not mean it to be so, but I *did* mean what I said about——"

But before she could mention the name that was fraught with such danger at the moment, visitors were announced, and Louise seized the opportunity for a moment's warning with her cousin apart.

"How could you be so ridiculous, Althea!" she cried in a reproachful whisper, the instant they were alone. "Just when I was getting so happy on your account, and feeling so relieved, you threaten to spoil all, by folly of this sort! You will get

yourself into no end of hot water when I am gone, if you have no more discretion than this."

"But, Louise," retorted the young champion, incensed in her turn by the irritable tone, "I think it is *they* who are ridiculous, to be up in arms in a moment upon such a trifling remark. Dear me! is Beaconsfield a Bible saint, that his name is to be spoken with bated breath? Besides, if it had been the other way, and Gladstone——"

But Louise closed the dispute with an irritation most unlike herself.

"Oh, dear me!" she cried, "do let politics alone; or at least wait till you get safe home. What have we women to do with Beaconsfield and Gladstone, I should like to know? They don't require *our* championship, you foolish child! And we have something better to do than fight their battles! Now then, brush your hair and come down with me, and *do* keep to safe subjects in future."

Althea's lip curled as she submitted, for she saw how illogical her cousin's reasonings were. If women had nothing to do with politics, why was the ill-advised mention of one of the leaders just now like putting the spark to a mine? It was not fair; it was almost tyrannical. And full of such thoughts, Althea's head was a little higher than usual as she returned to the room; and Frank, glancing across at the flushed face, saw plainly she had been receiving a lecture. And that night, when he took a chop with his friend in the dull London chambers, he related the whole story amid much merriment, even down to Miss Grace's sharp reproof of his own ill-concealed mirth.

Andrew threw back his head in infinite enjoyment of the scene.

"I can see it all, Conway," he cried; "but the silent horror of dear old Felicitas must have been far worse than Miss Grace's wrath." And, tilting back his chair in amused contemplation of the picture, his thoughts flew back to the first

time he had seen Althea, the joke of which was in his own keeping; and full of the Mazeppa-like creature he had so disturbed, he exclaimed, half under his breath, "What an odd little fish it is!"

"Two much warmth for a fish, I should say," rejoined his friend. "I have seen sparks of fire ere now under those long lashes. This morning, for instance, when Louise spoke slightingly of the hero brother, I was afraid for a moment there would be an explosion."

"I hope I shall be at hand if such a catastrophe should occur," was Mr. Valender's comment. "It would be dangerous in such an atmosphere; and I should like to be useful for once in the cold-water business. It brings out one's best energies, and develops latent capabilities, besides the novel excitement of the blaze."

"I would not trust you," replied Frank Conway, with an odd look at him. "In an explosion of this sort, I believe you would be safer at a distance; for you would be as ready with oil as with water, in certain moods."

Whether it was a certain smell of fire in the air that drew Andrew Valender to the neighbourhood of danger next morning, I cannot say; but he strolled into the dining-room in his own lazy fashion, replying to Miss Wynton's surprised exclamation with—

"It's a case of sick leave, dear cousin. Another long June day in that close room would have done for me, as it nearly did yesterday; and I felt, if I would ward off fever, I must get fresh air. Besides, I had news this morning from the mother and Mildred, and I knew you would like it at first hand."

He tossed the letter lightly into her lap as he spoke, in a manner significant enough. There were no home confidences, no sacred reserves between this mother and son, that the communication should be withheld. For that matter, all London might have read the short commonplace note, without either writer or receiver being much affected. To Althea,

whose home letters could only be read in solitude, this cool behaviour would have seemed marvellous; the idea of passing on one of *her* mother's letters to Miss Wynton or Miss Grace—albeit near relations—would have been inconceivably painful. But, as we know, that shabby little house in far-off Harington was as much outside the world and its ways as if it had been in the backwoods, and its inmates scarcely knew how little society can tolerate undue emotion.

So while Miss Wynton slowly followed the lines, her favourite took up the morning paper, casting a half-abstracted glance over the columns, replying from time to time to the old lady's remarks; then asked suddenly—

"But, Cousin Felicitas, how comes it that you are all alone? Where is Miss Grace? Where are the girls?—I beg their pardon—the young women—the three Graces—whatever we may call them?"

"Here is one!" cried Miss Grace, appearing suddenly at the open window, very flushed and panting. "One of the four Graces, you might have said, young man, since you were in the complimentary vein. When you begin in that style, you may as well not stint the measure." And the next moment in she came, with her trowel still in her hand, and dropped heavily down in the nearest chair, lamenting the extreme difficulty of gardening operations under a midsummer sun.

"You *should* wait till the cool of the evening. You will get sunstroke one of these days," was all the interest her sister vouchsafed, as she sat, cool and comfortable, in her high-backed chair. To her, Miss Grace's vigorous operations were an absurd waste of strength, and the energetic fanning that had set in made her feel hot herself.

"I wish that child would come," was the younger sister's next comment. "I did want to get those two new beds arranged this morning; and she has taken quite a turn at gardening since she came here. But I suppose we must give it up for to-day. Ah, Andrew! talking of the Graces, you

are come just in time for an opinion. We are going to have our private view."

"It is all Greek to me," was the reply, as the young man glanced in perplexity from one face to the other. But at this instant the door opened, and Louise led in her bridesmaids, arranged for inspection in the festive dresses newly arrived from town. And at the first glimpse Andrew Valender sprang up and did obeisance, half mockingly, half in earnest, and with an energy most unlike his usual languor.

"This is not fair!" cried Daisy, drawing back for one brief instant at sight of the fresh arrival, and then coming forward, laughing and blushing in the prettiest way. But, fair or unfair, she looked as if she were not sorry, and did not mind at all.

Mind! Why should she, indeed? As she stood there by Miss Felicia's side, conscious that each face expressed fullest approval, conscious that every fold of the soft draperies of creamy white and blue only threw into relief some new grace and developed some latent charm, why should she mind the grey eyes above her resting a little longer than they could politely do, *except* at a private view? The look lingered, so that Daisy must have been more or less than woman if she had failed to see it, or to understand that moment that he admired her thoroughly. So while the women gathered round, and commented in the way peculiar to them, all Andrew would say, when asked for his opinion, was—

"It is a daisy—at her *daintiest*."

But even Daisy knew when to be satisfied, and had no idea of engrossing the whole attention; but as she stood a little aside for her fellow bridesmaid, the anxious cloud Louise's brow had worn that day in town was reflected on all around.

Poor Althea! The pitying Louise felt her worst fears were realized, and that if they had all tried, they could hardly have done her cousin more injustice. The gown did not do—could not be made to do. It bagged, it puckered, it hung limply upon the tall, undeveloped figure, that had never

perhaps looked so sadly unfinished as now; while even the face seemed to Louise to have taken a colourless, sallow tint under the ill-omened comments.

Miss Wynton's slight nervous coughs were almost as bad as her sister's outspoken bluntness. The half-suppressed exclamation of "A regular scarecrow!" had sent the blood tingling, indeed, to poor Althea's cheeks and brow. But the next moment they were paler even than before, for nothing that Louise or Daisy could do to soften the result could hide from the girl herself that she was a failure, and, what was worse than all, that she cared so much about it.

So she stood, with drooping head and self-accusing heart, hardly noticing Louise's tender little efforts to make the best of a bad business, or Daisy's evident compunction, or even Aunt Grace's suggestion, as still with the soiled trowel in her hand, she indicated possible alterations.

Louise felt really annoyed with Daisy for the first time in her life, and only remarked at length, as she knelt at Althea's feet—

"It is of no use, Aunt Grace. I have tried everything you suggest, but the mistake arose in choosing what did not suit her. If we had only time before us, I should not mind so much. But I suppose we must try and get this altered somehow; only——"

"That thing will never do!" broke in another voice in most decided tones, as Andrew coolly took the trowel from Miss Grace's hand, and put her gently but firmly aside. "It is out of harmony every way, don't you see?" Then, as if recollecting himself, he added, apologetically, "But I am coming out of my province, and must ask pardon. Only, as this was said to be a private view, I was half forgetting we were not inspecting pictures."

"Tell us what to do!" cried Louise, catching at a straw in the helplessness of the moment; for, with the wedding close upon them, and Daisy and herself so happily provided, it was

cruelly hard on Althea. "You are an artist, and have ideas. Only tell us what to do."

He bowed in the same half-laughing manner he had at first, and, seeing corroboration of Louise's words in the faces of the rest, took carte-blanche at once, nothing loth, and went on—

"If Miss Holmes is a woman of spirit, as I have every reason to believe, she won't be beguiled by new finery into being untrue to artistic principles. I would not waste a thought on that piece of trumpery." (How Daisy's eyebrows rose at the term!) "I would make a bonfire of it, rather than meddle with a stitch of the thing! And what I would suggest, Miss Felicia, is that that old brocade of yours be unearthed. You remember it? It last saw the light at our charades two or three winters ago."

How they all stared at the young fellow and his cool proposals! And while they paused, almost open-mouthed, he laid his hand upon the bell.

"I'll ring for Phelps to dig it up, shall I?"

And Phelps appearing before Daisy could stammer faintly, "Old primrose brocade—who ever heard of such a thing!" there was nothing left for Miss Wynton but to give the order.

"It is not so very old," he remarked by way of encouragement when Phelps had withdrawn; "that is to say, it is not the least soiled or faded, if I remember aright. And if our bridesmaid can only look like Cousin Felicitas must have done when she wore that superlative gown——" But both the arch look and the jesting remark were arrested by the old lady's calling him to order, though her face was far less peremptory than her tone.

"It will never fit," remarked Miss Grace, crossly, for she never liked allusions to her sister's youthful days.

"My dear Miss Grace," he replied mildly, "I fear you did not profit by your late visit to the Academy. What we want,

on happy occasions such as Thursday next, is the *general effect*. Once get the true artistic basis, and no one will be critical about the subject being a little out of drawing."

So Althea was despatched to make closer acquaintance with the old brocade. She did not half like it, and Louise slipped away with her to help cover her confusion; but when she once more appeared upon the scene, every one was forced to admit Mr. Valender had ideas.

It was more than a little "out of drawing," as he expressed it, or in plainer language, sundry alterations were imperative; but every one saw in a moment what he meant by the *artistic* basis. The rich, quaint, soft material; the antique style—and most of all, the pale suggestive tint had a wonderful effect on the girl's peculiar tone. It seemed as if an old-world melody, played just now in some jangling discord, were creeping back into delicious harmony; and when young Valender, glancing eagerly round in search of something, had rushed into the drawing-room for a soft scarf of old gold colour that was looping back a curtain, and thrown it lightly round the slender shoulders, the effect was perfect. It was like a strong triumphant chord gathering those creeping, faltering notes, and filling the measure of perfect sound.

It was a singular moment. The women had followed these rapid movements in passive, almost breathless silence. At first, not one of them spoke; but that last touch was like an inspiration, and an involuntary sound, as of deeply-drawn breath, escaped the lips of more than one of them. As for Andrew himself, all his languor had flown for the moment; and forgetful of all else, in the interest of the subject, he placed his hands lightly on the girl's shoulders, and led her to the old pier-glass without a word.

Althea only took the swiftest, most momentary glance; and even in *that*, perhaps she saw more than a bright unfamiliar vision in primrose-coloured brocade—a face beside her own, flushed out of its usual paleness to a glowing animation, a

keen delight, the grey eyes softening and sparkling in the artist's peculiar joy in a new discovery.

It would be difficult to put in words just what Althea felt in that brief instant. Her extreme sensitiveness, that read the faces of others like an open book, and that had made her head droop under the adverse criticism of their glances, now saw in each the willing or unwilling homage softening every brow. Her father's laments over her want of beauty came rushing back to her mind, and while a new sunshine flashed into her face, the great brown eyes had almost a child's softness beneath their radiant light, as she said, low and humbly—

"Thank you, Mr. Valender; it is all your doing."

Daisy Conway caught the look—the tone—and misinterpreted both. How could Daisy, used as she was to admiration, understand the sudden wave of gratitude that had flashed a living light into Althea's eyes, and revealed to her strange possibilities, till now seemingly denied to her? To understand it she must have been, like Althea, accustomed to be passed by, and occasionally even grieved over, as a disappointment and a failure.

"It doesn't fit the least in the world," said Miss Wynton, then; for the momentary surprise being over, her brow, like Daisy's, wore a slight cloud, she hardly knew why. But the matter-of-fact remark broke the spell that had held them all, and everybody came back to commonplace in an instant.

As for Andrew, the light had faded out of his face by this time, and Miss Felicia's cold tone seemed to irritate him most unduly.

"Of course it doesn't," he retorted so shortly, that from any other than the favoured one it would have sounded rude; "no one expected it would. But Phelps has the use of her two hands, I suppose, and has achieved more than this before now."

And, evidently feeling no more could be expected of him, he took up his paper and strolled out into the garden, leaving the brocade to its fate.

Half an hour later, when Phelps had set to work with

trembling fingers on the precious fabric that was to play its part so soon in this unexpected manner, and when the girls had sent off to town for the little commissions the change of Althea's costume rendered necessary, Miss Grace came upon her sister all unawares, gazing with quite a curious thoughtfulness at the miniature above the mantelpiece.

"Yes," cried Miss Grace, in her quick way, as if she were replying to a remark that had been made; "yes, so it struck me. But I did not know you saw it too."

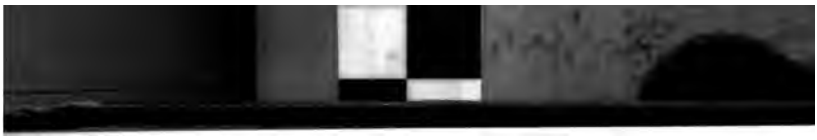
"It was that boy's doing," said Miss Felicia. "I told you he had talent; but you always will laugh at him, and call it waste of time when he does anything outside his profession. It was wonderful though—that transformation of Althea. I had never seen her mother in her before, and just now she had a look—a sudden likeness that went beyond her mother, and reminded me strangely of *this*. Andrew," she said, turning to him, as he strolled up at the moment, "I am thinking we must not laugh any more at what Grace calls artistic jargon. It means more than I thought."

"If it means turning rather a plain young person into something nearly approaching a beauty, I must take back my words," said the younger sister; while Andrew replied—

"You mistake. Whatever beauty you saw was there before. Art only interprets what it finds."

"I should never call Althea Holmes a beauty," said Miss Felicia, decidedly. "The world judges differently to when I was young, and the new generation have new ideas of many things—perhaps wiser—possibly the reverse. Still, I will admit I saw a glimpse of *this* face in Althea just now, in that strange way likenesses flash sometimes into faces that are most unlike. Did you see it, Andrew?"

The answer did not hurry itself. The young man quietly took down Madame Wynton from her particular nook in the panelled wall, and made a deliberate examination of every feature of the bonny face, before replying, coolly—



"Very flattering to madam, your grandmother, it seems to me."

Miss Felicia for once in her life lost all patience, even with her hero. "You say it on purpose to annoy me, I suppose, Andrew," she said; "for at least I give you credit for some taste. The idea of comparing Althea Holmes with that miniature, to her *advantage*, forsooth! You may not know, perhaps, but I do, that my grandmother was an acknowledged beauty in her day, and had quite a little court of her own at Bath."

"Very possibly," returned Mr. Valender, with provoking calm. "It is a good face—a fine face, with its delicately-moulded nose, and irresistible chin, to say nothing of its more telling features. Character, I should say behind that—strength—a certain amount of archness that would tell well with her style of beauty in that little world you spoke of; but there is something lacking in it that dawns occasionally in the other—*naïveté*, originality, and, I should not wonder, under strong emotion, *soul*."

"You have studied it to some purpose, it seems," was the cold reply, as Miss Wynton turned away; but the utter indifference of his remark reassured her.

"Of course I have," he said lightly. "I would give up those musty chambers to-morrow if I could see my way, and go in for a studio, neck and crop; for as it is, I fear my poor father's business is taking wings to itself, and leaving me in the lurch."

"And whose fault is that, I should like to know," said Miss Grace promptly, turning upon him one of her most severe glances; for his desultory habits were a constant thorn in her side, and she never spared the rod of her wholesome reproof, if so be she might save the lad from the fate of the ne'er-do-well.

Perhaps he had so many of them that he was callous by this time, for they generally had the effect of making him exhibit himself in the worst possible light to these two faithful

old hearts. So he idled away all that afternoon, and waited to see the primrose brocade once more, when it finally emerged from Phelps's hands; and then fetched Jess and rode away, without staying for dinner.

But if the old ladies had seen him, late on into the night, wrestling his very hardest to catch the expression of Althea's face, as she had looked at him that morning in the sudden surprise of her own beauty, it might not have pleased them, perhaps, though they could not have accused him of idleness. He tried so long and so unsuccessfully that he left the face awhile, and humoured himself with a few swift studies of the slender, girlish figure, and of the old brocade. These came out well enough—tiresomely well enough, when so baffled by the other—then back to the face again. It would not do: it was worse than before; and with an impatient gesture, he flung open a great portfolio, and heaps of finished and unfinished sketches came tumbling out—more or less happy in their likeness to the originals; but amongst them, the few renderings of this last new face were a distinct failure. Loth to be overcome, he went at it again, more earnestly than ever; but the sorry attempts that grew under his touch had only the effect of making the living face less clear in his memory, and he tossed the paper away at last, dispirited and moody.

"A fine fellow you are, Master Valender!" he muttered, as with hands deep in his pockets, he dismally watched his evening's efforts slowly consuming in the little grate. "You had better be off to bed, and wake up a wiser man, and prepare to stick to your father's trade, for that is all you are fit for! If you have not made an arrant simpleton of yourself this livelong day, there's not one in London; and so I verily believe they all begin to think at Elm-leigh."

But just one comforting thought came into the gloomy retrospect at this point. If all at Elm-leigh, from Miss Wynton down to poor Phelps with her roughened forefinger, should agree in thinking he might have been better employed than in

playing the dressmaker, there was at least *one* he had helped through a trial—one whose face had leaped into sunshine at that foolish work of his.

Accustomed as he was to be thought an idler, a scapegrace, and loved and humoured through all with that half-bantering fondness that such natures often get, it was a new and strangely welcome sensation to have helped some one ever so little to a taste of joy. It was as if, with his strong man's hand, he had pushed open a door at which a little child stood helpless, and had disclosed, to her delight, a fair garden all undreamed of before.

For the joy was not necessarily in him, only *through* him—in the one case as well as in the other. Althea's radiant eyes had only rested on him a moment, as that little child's might, before passing in without him to a new world of happiness; but that they had rested there at all, as an acknowledgment of good, saved him from the blankness of a wasted and misspent day.

The "sacred duty of giving pleasure" had never as yet been a distinct idea, far less an aim, in Andrew Valender's up-bringing. Life had been a hap-hazard affair at the best. But trifles are sufficient at times to alter the current of a stream; and it might be—it was possible—that the old brocade had played a nobler part than figuring in winter charades, or even in a Midsummer wedding.

CHAPTER VIII.

POETRY AND PROSE.

"So far as one is of the poetical temperament, he is likely to be a lover of trees. Trees have no nerves. They live and die without suffering, without self-questioning, without self-reproach. They have the divine gift of silence. We lean against them, and they never betray our trust. They cannot obtrude upon our solitary moments."—O. W. HOLMES (*Hundred Days*).

"It often seems to me that voices proceed from trees and flowers—which speak to me of the great and good Creator, and of the life which they have received from Him. Everywhere a spirit meets me which is like myself—which I can understand and love. And where, and in what circumstance of life, breathe not such voices from the things and beings which surround us? There is only demanded of us an open ear—and a pure heart."—*The Neighbours.*

THE old routine at Elm-leigh was effectually broken up for the time being, in the way weddings and funerals have of asserting their sway. A pause in the ceaseless round is demanded by either occasion; for by the power each has of stirring the human heart to its depths, the outward and visible elements of the home may well correspond in their measure with the changes within.

The last evening had come, and no one dreamed of music or cribbage to-night. Althea and Daisy were busy in the hall, with bowls and dishes of every description, arranging the flowers that lay around them in wild and exquisite confusion; and the Misses Wynton, unusually restless and excited, kept looking in upon them from time to time with suggestions or

approval, or giving last directions to the servants who passed busily to and fro, in sympathetic anticipation of the morrow. Louise had done her full share hitherto, but she was absolved to-night from any claim but the dearest of all; she and her lover were having that last quiet stroll in the old garden now; and when she appeared at length and joined her bridesmaids among the flowers, her face, though sweet and tender as ever, had none of the excitement those around her manifested.

She stood pensively a moment, watching the rapid fingers at their work, but for once even forgetting to offer her help; and, when Daisy asked for her brother, was told he had already left.

"Yes, dear," was Louise's reply, "he had much to do to-night, and I promised to make excuses for him, as it was just train time. We both wanted quiet. And now, if you do not mind, I will wish Aunt Felicia good night, and go upstairs."

It was a touching picture a moment later—the girlish figure kneeling beside the armchair in the old panelled drawing-room, and the fond old arms encircling it with a caressing pressure, such as they had never bestowed before. Louise's fresh young face rested a long minute against the soft faded cheek; and when she rose, and passed swiftly up the stairs, tears were in her eyes, and she could find no voice to answer Althea, who called some cheery word to her as she sped past them.

But, once alone, with her writing-case before her, and her head resting on her hands, the tears broke forth in full measure, and it was not Aunt Felicia who had to answer for these. A great yearning had seized the motherless girl for the tender face that had beamed upon her orphaned babyhood, for the aunt whose love she felt she had wronged at this last stage of her youth, in order to make her own path easier on the morrow. As she paced the garden alleys, leaning on her bridegroom's arm, self-reproach mingled with the natural pensiveness of the

time, and kept her silent and subdued; and it was a relief to be alone at last, and to sob out her misgivings undisturbed.

"Dearest mother," she wrote when a little calmer ("for such, and more than such, have you ever been to me), never forget that on this last night of the old life, your child is thinking of none but you, and asking your forgiveness for any pain or disappointment she has ever caused you, from the first day you sheltered her till now. If you are grieved to-night, or wounded in ever so small a degree, that I should be content to be absent from you at such a time, remember—always remember, Mamsey dearest—that I am *not* content; that my better self has come back, and that if I could change all with a word, and go forth from the dear little home to-morrow with the blessing of my best loved ones, I would do it now. Whatever may happen, remember that. And oh! Mamsey, my more than mother, if the spirits in paradise can see us here, you are thanked to-night by worthier ones than I. The mother I never knew is blessing you in my behalf; and I, upon my knees, as I write this, am praying God to bless you, and make up to you for what I have failed to be. And again I say it, while this last letter is wet and blotted with my tears, that Louise has room in her heart this strange last evening for none but you."

Althea came in with some jesting remark before the letter was finished, and paused in amazement at her cousin's unwonted distress. Louise faltered some broken words of explanation, and Althea felt a sudden sense of self-reproach that at such a time Castle Street should have faded in her own mind into the background. For a long while after she had lain down in somewhat subdued reflection, Louise was on her knees at her evening prayer, and after Althea's first light sleep, she started to see the fair head still bent, and the quiet figure still immovable.

"Louise," she called gently, half-alarmed; and then the girl lifted her head, and, rising at last, prepared for rest. It was still a shaded face, but a calmer one now, and her last words

to her cousin that night, as they clung together in the darkness, were—

"My heart is full to-night, Althea—full even to pain. If this time ever come to *you*, as I trust it will, you will understand; you will feel as I do, that unalloyed happiness is not to be had in this life."

But the rising sun chased away more than material shadows, and Louise's face had lost its sadness on her bridal morning; and though a certain pensiveness still returned at times, she was her own graceful little self once more, ready to forestall everybody's wants, and meet new arrivals with the sunny smile that was itself a welcome.

Her heart was as much at peace with itself as the yearning want of the mother's presence would allow. Before any of the family had left their rooms, Louise had slipped downstairs and waylaid the old servant man in his round in the garden, with last night's letter in her hand.

"Rawlings," she began, interrupting his surprised exclamation with a little gesture—"yes, I know it is very early, but I want something done now at once, while I wait. We women are prisoners of state to-day, you know, and cannot do our own errands. If you will go straight away and post this for me, you will make me happy. You would like to do that, on this particular day, I know."

The old man bowed his grey head, and bent low before her for a minute, as if she had been a queen.

"If going on my bare knees would do you greater service, Miss Annesley," he began, in a trembling voice, for he had caught sight of the address, and visions of the bright Miss Althea of long ago, that *ought* to be here to-day, mingled with his loving loyalty to the young bride-elect, and made speech difficult.

"I know you would, dear old Rawlings," Louise put in quickly; "but as speed and safety are the most important things just now, I will not ask you for such a proof of your affection

as going on your knees. Come back to tell me that is in time for the early post, and I shall be quite happy."

She paced the garden walk till he returned at the utmost speed his rheumatism would allow, and then, could the family within have seen the dignified little Louise the next moment, they would have been somewhat startled. In the safe shelter of the dim trees, she took the rough hand in both her own, and lightly touched it with her lips.

"That is for the Miss Eva you remember so well," she said; "and that for the Miss Althea, who is here in spirit to-day, though far away; and that, the last, for myself, because you have lifted a load from my heart. There now, make the most of them, for I shall have to ask Mr. Conway's leave after to-day."

It was a touch like Mamsey thus to run on lightly to hide her emotion, and so Rawlings thought as, with a wave of the hand, she turned and sped towards the house, leaving the old man bareheaded and rooted to the spot. The next glimpse he had of her was in her bridal veil as she passed up the aisle of the little church among the friends and well-wishers who filled its seats from end to end; her face composed and peaceful now, though the thought did even then occur to her that Uncle Roy or Edmund should have supported her, instead of stiff old-fashioned Mr. Blakeney, whose manner was as pompous as his standing was high.

"*Pura siccome un Angelo*," involuntarily thought Andrew Valender; for the kneeling white-robed figure, upon which, through the stained window above it, the sunbeams fell in such rich embroidery of colour, had the same effect upon his poetic temperament as a strain of exquisite music would have done. Until her bridegroom moved to her side, and the old clergyman's voice broke the spell, Louise had looked like some fair vestal dedicated to Heaven, rather than an earthly bride.

But the thought soon passed. *Francis John's* voice was distinctly human, as he claimed *Evaleen Louise* to be his wedded wife till death should them part; and Louise's "*I will*" was

given as unfalteringly. And then the little golden seal was set upon the union, the rector's hands were spread a moment in blessing over the wedded pair, and the sweet bride began her flower-strewn path on her husband's arm, to the triumphant peal of music and the clash of bells.

There was the usual chorus of congratulation and greeting at the church door, amid the joyous chime of bells and the dashing up of the wedding carriages; but Althea caught her breath hard as she passed into the outer air. She felt as if she had been awakened from some lovely dream, that had held her in that strange pleasure so near to pain ever since she had first seen Louise in her bridal veil.

How close the old poems were coming now! Was that the Louise she had so often seen engaged in small household tasks and homely services, and whom she and the boys had presumed so often to rally on her dainty neatness and love of order? That solitary figure she had seen but now in its ethereal loveliness, and the sight of which had made Althea catch her breath with almost a sob, as she realized that a leaf in the book of her life was being turned for ever? And that first upward look at her bridegroom as they rose from their knees, one in name and heart—Althea had seen that too, and it had seemed to her as if Andromache herself could not have looked more beautiful under the gaze of Hector.

Could the old routine ever come back to any of them again? Her heart was full as she followed Louise and her husband over the flowers; and she turned for a last look at the little church, where the rays from the stained window seemed to follow them all like a benediction, and where the "Wedding March" was still pealing from the very organ her mother had played upon in the long ago. Ah me! And here were friends and acquaintance joining them already, to congratulate and comment, and the strange everyday chatter was a rude awakening from dreams.

How Althea envied her cousin for having gone swiftly out

of it all—the commonplaces seemed like desecration just then. The music within was over, and here was Mr. Blakeney bantering Miss Felicia on her comely appearance, and saying he should have made a mistake if she had been within reach, and have taken her for the bride.

And while Aunt Grace snorted audibly, and Mr. Blakeney bent down in his stiff way with his hand to his ear, to catch her remark, almost inaudible amid the clang of the bells, Althea turned to her fellow bridesmaid, to see her absorbed in the folds of her creamy drapery that some unlucky foot had sadly disarranged.

And so it went on more or less all through the day.

The bride and bridegroom left early, and then boredom set in. The invited guests were mostly friends of Miss Wynton and her sister, and therefore no longer young; and it was wearisome enough to listen to Mr. Blakeney's old-fashioned compliments, and to hear Mrs. Conway and Mrs. Stanway and the others each told in succession the story of her unfortunate dress, and how Mr. Valender's cleverness had come to the rescue.

Althea's heart ached under it all. She began almost to hate the lovely old brocade that had been so much to her that first moment of her surprise. Was it *because* it had been so much to her then, that these commonplace remarks and gossip seemed to be brushing the bloom off some exquisite flower? And, if she were sick of it all herself, Andrew evidently was also; for he rose suddenly at last, and beckoned Daisy to stroll with him round the garden.

How Althea longed for her mother then, or Edmund, or any of the dear home faces, in the first hours of missing Louise! As soon as she could, she seized the opportunity of flying to her room—*their* room, where Louise had given her her farewell kiss, and where Phelps was even now gathering together bridal trifles, hastily thrown off, to put away for "Mrs. Frank" by-and-by.

Althea stopped her suddenly. "Phelps," she said, "if you do not mind, I should so like to do that myself, when I come to bed. It is all I can do for her now, you know, and she will so soon be quite gone away from us. And now," she added, as she slipped off the old brocade, and placed it in a heap in the waiting-woman's arms, "please put this safely away again where it was before. It is quite done with."

If Phelps caught a certain despondency in the last words, she was of course too well trained to notice it, and naturally put it down to the loss of Miss Annesley. Althea herself thought that was the reason of her unwonted depression; and yet, as she closed the door upon Phelps and her burden, and arrayed herself in the simple white dress her mother had made, there was more in the sigh that rose, all unbidden, than she could fathom as yet.

She looked like the child-Althea again, that had lingered in the shrubbery in such home-sickness that first night, and had soiled her frock by leaning against the trees. The green smirches were all removed now, and the soft muslin was fresh and clean; but as she thought of them they seemed somehow a type of the child-life that could never come back any more.

Since she had first worn that frock, all sorts of changes had happened; Elm-leigh life had become familiar and natural; and for one sudden, bewildering moment—one never-to-be-forgotten time—she had seen herself transformed from a homely maiden into something like a beautiful woman. Was it only the old brocade that had glorified her for that brief instant, or was it——

Whatever it was, it did not matter one iota. It mattered simply that there was a dull party below, and that she must go and help to amuse them in spite of home-sickness or anything else, for life is not poetry after all, for many people, but very sober prose.

So, slipping into the nearest vacant seat when she reached the drawing-room, Althea found herself beside Mrs. Blakeney,

to whom she soon proposed a walk round the garden in the shade of the trees. Her companion good-naturedly assented, although her armchair was supremely comfortable just then, and the garden had not the same charm for her; but with a large parasol shading the delicate lace of her head-gear, she found it pleasant enough.

"Well, my dear," she began, "this is a happy occasion, is it not? I always did like weddings since I was young myself, and nothing makes me so glad as to be invited to one; and after marrying four daughters, I ought to know something about them. But my interest is as fresh as ever. Dear me! I remember your cousin almost a baby, when she first came to Elm-leigh to visit; and it seems but yesterday to look back, and if the old adage is true about the bride that the sun shines on, there is not much doubt about *her* future.

"Mr. Conway has very good prospects, I hear, and there is good society in Calcutta, so that even if he has not much money at present they will do very well, and your cousin will make her way wherever she goes. So will that little sister-in-law of hers, who, I hear, is going to be Mrs. Andrew Valender; and I'm sure I hope it is true, for I am always glad to hear of young people being safely married. Even if the young man is not quite so industrious as he might be, from all accounts, it is time enough yet. And if, as rumour whispers, he will have Miss Wynton's money, he will settle down and be as steady as old Time, when he is once married. So I prophesy we shall be meeting again in a year or two, at most, on another joyous occasion, for you will be wanted to play your part as prettily as you did to-day in that quaint gown; only, my dear, you must promise no more after that. 'Three times bridesmaid, never a bride,' you know; and I shall see you yet in a more important part than you had to-day, I hope."

"Unimportant enough my part is now," was Althea's inward comment, "merely to listen, with or without attention, to a stream of babbling gossip."

Aloud she only remarked, "Why did you say *safely* married, Mrs. Blakeney?"

"Why, my dear, you must know how terribly women preponderate nowadays, and how impossible it is for all to be settled in life. I have no head for statistics, but the account Mr. Blakeney read to me the other day from the *Times*, of the infinite number of gentlewomen who are forced to go out in the world and fight their own battles, was simply appalling. I felt more thankful than ever that neither of my children would have to be put to such a test, especially as—between ourselves—one of them had made me rather anxious about her future. She was eight and twenty before she had an offer; but after all, she has done as well or better than the other three who went off early, and she has a handsome establishment of her own. Still, that is an exception, and I would advise all young people over whom I have any influence, not to trifle with their opportunities."

"You agree with Herrick, then," murmured Althea with a curling lip.

> "Then be not coy, but use your time,
> And while ye may, go marry."

"Exactly; if that was Herrick's sentiment, he was wiser than most of the rhymesters," was the reply. "Anyway he would suit our times better than most of them, for these are not the days when lovers serenade their mistresses half the night, or when girls expect to be worshipped as they once were. The young men of the present have an eye to pounds, shillings, and pence, and look further ahead than you young things sometimes imagine. So, my dear, I advise you as I did my own children, not to be over-particular about good looks, or to indulge romantic notions of a paradise on earth; but just accept the first suitable opening, and you will be as happy as most people, if you do your duty."

"Thank you, Mrs. Blakeney," was Althea's quiet rejoinder.

So low and humble the tone sounded, that no one would have guessed the fire within, nor how the woman-heart was beating with a fierce resentment beneath the childish exterior. She was not angry with old Mrs. Blakeney exactly; only with the condition of things of which she was the willing mouthpiece. For it seemed to her that moment that some foul glare had been let in upon the sweet dewy pictures and day-dreams of her youth, and that life was a mean, sordid business after all. She let the old lady run on as long as she would, and then said very quietly, as they turned at the sound of Mr. Blakeney's call—

"I never mean to be married, you know. I am going to make the very best I can of that lot you think so terrible."

Her companion laughed good-naturedly. "Romantic child!" she cried; "I will believe that statement when the time comes. I said that myself once, and in less than a year accepted Mr. Blakeney."

Well, it was over at last, and Mr. and Mrs. Blakeney had driven off in the golden evening, and so the other guests had filtered away in twos and threes; all but Mr. Valender, who had promised to stay over the night and cheer Miss Felicia, who was a little downcast.

Mrs. Conway had only come for the wedding, and now left her daughter, at Miss Wynton's request, to be a companion for Althea during the last fortnight of her stay.

It was a moping sort of evening, and time dragged on; at ast Miss Grace's fatigue grew so entirely uncontrollable that her sister looked up reprovingly, and asked with dignity—

"Are you *very* tired, Grace?"

"I begin to think the day has been long enough," was the reply, "for at times like these, with regular hours all set aside, one does not know what part of the day one is in. It seems ages since we went to church this morning. Let us have some coffee, and then, I believe, I will go to bed."

There really did not seem much to sit up for, so after a somewhat silent gathering for coffee, and a laugh at the idea of going to bed in the twilight, the women dispersed, leaving Andrew Valender with a book by the drawing-room lamp.

Oh, how thankful Althea felt to be alone at last with that tired, jaded, home-sick heart of hers, even though the silent room brought back afresh her first pain at losing Louise! She felt stifled; as though, ever since the morning when she had awoke at the church door from beautiful dreams to sober reality, her free, buoyant, expansive spirit had been caught and fettered by sordid hands, till the very life was almost crushed out of it.

How she had writhed under Mrs. Blakeney's terrible commonplaces! How grievous it had been to hear life cheapened so, and made to appear a mere bargain to be driven hardest and fastest by the smartest woman, instead of the beautiful gift with endless possibilities for good, she had loved to picture it!

Could it really be that other people looked at life's problem in Mrs. Blakeney's way, and that she had never found it out till now? Oh, if it were really so, she could rejoice that there was one dear spot in England even now, in which sordid visions, such as these, had no room to enter. For Castle Street had one little nook in it, safe and sacred with home love and unworldly ends, in which, rather than submit to the fearful ideas she had just heard expounded, Althea would be content to live and die.

And to think that Mamsey—her beautiful little mother—had been debarred from Elm-leigh life because she had married a man whose shoes the Blakeneys, and their fellows, were not fit to carry! Yes, a man whom that moment the girl was proud to call her father.

The thoughts came leaping on in such a rush that she felt half bewildered, and, drawing up the blind, dashed the light curtains aside, and flung the window wide as it would

go, with something of the same heart-oppression as on that first evening. And, as then, the sweet air and the peaceful scene calmed and soothed her; but it brought with it, too, a dangerous longing for liberty. She had worn, as it were, an iron collar all day, and now she decided that she could not go to bed with the sense of the galling yoke still upon her; she must have one brief ramble under the dear trees and among the flowers, and then breathing would be less difficult, and sleep would come.

What harm could there be? The garden was safe as the house itself; it was hardly dark even yet, and no one need know; every one was gone to rest. Even Mr. Valender's door had closed five minutes ago; and as to the servants, they were keeping up the festivities awhile in their own part of the premises, so the doors would be safe for the time being. Arguing thus, and flinging a light wrap round her shoulders, the next moment Althea was stealthily creeping downstairs; she noiselessly opened the heavy garden door, for it was as well not to attract remark, though she would not have minded very much if she had been overheard. The sounds of mirth reached her from the servants' hall, but they were too occupied to hear the slight scrape of the door; and now she was out in the blessed air.

Ah, *how* blessed it was! The first breath of air that met her as she stepped outside had healing in it; and though the flowers had almost lost their colour in the deepening twilight, their fragrance had a subtle message that arrested her hurrying footsteps, and brought the white-draped figure to a stand beside the first rose-bush it reached.

"Be comforted," the flowers seemed to say. "Life is beautiful yet for those who will have it so. It is only sordid to sordid souls. Look at us; we are pure and happy as were the first flowers in Eden. You love us; keep your ear ever open to our language then, and we will save you from unworthy ends."

Althea took one of the sweet creamy blooms, and drew in

its perfume with a sigh that was almost happy. The tightening bands oppressed her no longer; her spirit rose, released and free, even if subdued; and as she raised her eyes to the quiet heavens above her, a smile played about her mouth. "I am not Maud Blakeney," she thought to herself; "no one wants *me* safely off their hands, or will grieve if I grow old and am still unsought. Our world is a different world from theirs, and life is something better than a rush to the altar, with a prize for the winners, and a blank for the rest. *Prize*, indeed! Did Mrs. Blakeney think she had drawn a prize when she married that pompous, idealess potentate, who looked at our Louise this morning as if she had been a piece of polished furniture he could vouch for being well made? O God, forgive me such bitter moods! they desecrate this evening peace. And, O God" (with a sudden passionate earnestness, as Althea's hands covered her face an instant), "make me good! I long to be good and worthy of the home that has reared me. Save me from false ideas and low desires. Do Thou help me to aspire, so that life may be high and sacred, even if happiness, such as Louise's, be not for me."

The shrubbery door was reached now, and Althea paused, after passing it, under the shadowy elms. How long it seemed since she had first stood there a fortnight ago, when she had longed to be back again in the safe home nest! And how sweet the thought of it was at this moment! Though she had promised too much, and could not return just as she came, because of new light let in upon many points that were dark before, it would be home, always home, while father and mother were there to shelter her; and small rooms and cheap belongings, with love pervading them, would weigh well in the balance against fine houses and low, ignoble aims.

Of course the old poems meant something beyond all this; but, then, some people have to do without poetry, or else make it for themselves. Althea's thoughts had flown back to the old brocade, and the one moment of her life she had really

seen herself to be beautiful, when her spirit had awoke suddenly under the fire of those glowing eyes, where the light had died out almost as soon as it dawned, remaining long enough, however, to reveal the idea of what a man's love *could* be.

"I shall have Edmund," she reflected, when she reached this point. "Jack will marry some day, when he is old enough and can afford it; he is sure to do so; but I hope Edmund will not. Oh, I hope dear old Ted will always stay as he is now, and that we may go through life together, and meet its——"

The quiet stream of thought was broken rudely enough, in a way that sent Althea's heart to her mouth and a faint scream of real terror to her lips, as she turned to fly. But the next moment her terror gave place to a different and worse distress, as she saw who it was that had emerged from the rustic summer-house, and met the indignant astonishment of Andrew Valender's gaze.

She did not know that for the last quarter of an hour he had been having a peaceful pipe in the shrubbery alcove, or that he had been startled a few minutes after reaching it by the crackling of the boughs on the other side of the little boundary ditch, and had been just in time to see a man's figure beating retreat.

Unwelcome thoughts of occasional nocturnal visitors, to houses in which wedding presents are supposed to be, had speedily given place to other ideas. The brief glimpse he had caught had convinced him it was no burglar he had surprised; much more likely to be a friend of the pretty little housemaid, who was naturally shy of being detected, especially as the intruder looked something of a gentleman.

"I am spoiling sport," thought Andrew, as he smoked calmly on. "The next thing will be pretty Lucy in her pink ribbons coming to keep tryst, and I shall scare her off like her big lover. Weddings are infectious, it would seem."

So, keeping his eyes on the dusky pathway, he soon descried

his game. Not Lucy, indeed, in her pink ribbons—a much taller and slimmer figure in maiden white; and the sight startled the watcher into a strange, indignant contempt, such as he had never felt before. He had not had too exalted ideas of womanhood hitherto, but a certain piquant freshness in this newly-acquired visitor at Elm-leigh, and occasional glimpses he had had beneath the surface (coupled with stray bits of his friend Conway's conversation about her belongings), awakened him to the fact that women were not all cast in the same mould. Perhaps it was the dawning interest inspired by this discovery that now made the unexpected *rencontre* so disagreeable, and gave the disdainful tone to his voice, as he forcibly prevented her retreat.

"Miss Holmes chooses somewhat unusual hours for her walks, but perhaps that is one of the Harington customs! You need not go," he added carelessly. "I have been already *de trop*, but will trespass no longer. Good evening."

Althea had thought a moment ago, as she felt the indignity of a man's strong grasp upon her wrist, that a clutch of one of her Majesty's police force could not be more humiliating. She dimly realized now that there are degrees of anguish, and that the culminating point was reached in that careless bearing that implied she knew not what of degradation. Ah! was no one at hand to shield her? Now that even Louise's friendly hand was withdrawn, was she entirely alone and on her own resources?

She yearned to break out in a storm of sobs; but holding them down with all her might, she placed herself right in the path of the retreating figure, and faced it with her great eyes all ablaze.

"Mr. Valender," she said, "not yet; you must wait a moment! I cannot understand your words—your manner; but there is cruel meaning under them, I know. If only my brother had been here just now, you would not have *dared* to look as you did. But I have a right to know what you implied."

She stood before him bravely enough with her flashing eyes, but the tone was not brave at all. It was very low, because in her present distress it must have broken down in a sob had she tried to raise it; and the short, spasmodic sentences, determined though they were, had a curious effect upon the listener, coming as they did from lips that quivered so as to be almost inarticulate. He heard the quick, hard breathing, and longed to ask for pardon, but he was not entirely satisfied yet.

"It was not a wise proceeding," he began, in quite a different tone, "this solitary ramble after the household are gone to rest. Will you not, at least, explain your reason? I have no right to ask it, of course; but, seeing we are guests in the same house, it would be to our mutual comfort, it seems to me."

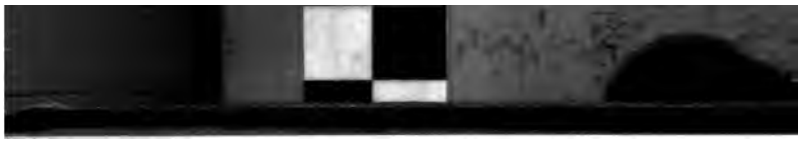
Circumstances were against Althea in all conscience. How could she make him understand her motive for rushing out into the free air, like a prisoner from his cell, to be alone with the trees! Unsophisticated though she was, she saw how ridiculous such a tale would sound in masculine ears; so, after a moment's hesitation, she replied—

"It is altogether out of my power to explain, had I the will. I only know that I was very tired and lonely, and longed to be at home. Ah! how I long to be there now, where I am understood without explaining."

The anger had died out of the voice by now, but an added sadness had come into it; and the eyes that had flashed with passion had softened, as she uttered the last words, in such a way that her companion forbore all mention of the figure he had seen clearing the boundary stream. To do so would seem like desecration, with those pure child-eyes upon his face.

"What has tired you so?" he asked gently. "Are weddings such fatiguing things that they must be followed by a tonic of some description?"

"It was not the wedding," she replied. "There are things that tire one more than hard manual labour, because they



touch something within; and such ideas are so new to me, that I feel them more. Some people's talk wears like a treadmill."

"You *look* tired," he said, still more gently. "I believe you are right, and that an hour at the treadmill would not have jaded you so. It has been a trying day for you from first to last."

The altered manner was too much for poor Althea in her present mood. Coming, as it did, just after the storm of her excitement, it was the hardest work to avoid giving way altogether; but she was not going to cry before a man. Turning abruptly aside, she bent over one of the sweetbriar bushes a moment, to gather calmness. But Andrew had keen eyes, and saw the tears and the struggle for self-mastery; and the moment was one of the most peculiar he had ever passed. If he did not draw nearer to her, as many another man might have done —alone, almost in the dark, with a young and interesting woman, and that woman in tears—it does not follow that he was indifferent to her distress.

And Althea little guessed, as she bit her quivering lips, and furtively brushed aside a few disobedient tears, that she was doing her sex a service, and awakening, in a somewhat cold and sceptical nature, a higher faith in womanhood. Even had she known it, she was too young as yet to be *satisfied* with that: woman's rights and woman's mission were mere empty phrases of party to her ears—about as satisfying as sawdust—and it was no such notion that possessed her now.

Womanlike, it was not of man in the abstract her thoughts were full; her heart was asking, almost unconsciously, the sweet heritage of one man's love and devotion. It might be such a gift were never to be hers, and that a time would come when it would be joy unspeakable to know that she had had her mission to one human heart, even if his love were given elsewhere. But not yet. The blossom must come before the fruit. Enough at this early period if the blossom gave promise of sweet sound fruitage, and not the worthless harvest of too many a mis-spent springtime.

But directly the passing wave of emotion had spent itself, Althea raised her head, and her companion moved to her side.

"Do you know," he began, "I am rather concerned about you, lest you should be missed up at the house, for that might be unpleasant for you. We must put up with nineteenth-century ideas, seeing we were born so late in history, mustn't we? And as those young Goliaths of Gath are not here, who were to make such short work of me, may I be allowed a brother's place to see you in?"

Althea smiled at the allusion to her Goliaths; but all the archness had gone out of it, and she was not herself yet. She disclaimed any need of protection; but when her companion quietly assumed more knowledge of the subject, she gave in passively enough. But at the shrubbery gate the subdued expression of her face, with the long eyelashes fringing the pale cheek, as she turned to pass through, struck Andrew a little painfully still.

He touched her hand a moment after closing the gate. "Is there no such thing as forgiveness?" he asked, and the grey eyes had quite a new expression. He had never looked more in earnest in his life than at that moment, as he gently detained her onward walk; and the touch, the tone, brought Althea's hand within his own instantly.

"Indeed there is! Indeed, it is no question of forgiveness at all," she said. "I was thinking about my own mistakes and ignorance of the world, and how unlike it is to all I have been used to. My world is so unconventional, and so free from rule and restraint; and my mother teaches us that if we are true to ourselves we shall never go far wrong. And yet to-night, and often since I came here, I have shocked people's ideas, and wronged my home training. But oh, Mr. Valender, what hurts me most of all is the thought of your look just now, when you came so suddenly upon me! I can only dimly guess what you meant; but that a *man* should ever look at me for a moment as you did then—— I don't think a man can

understand just what a woman suffers under a look like that; and it made me feel as if it reflected on my mother."

The answer was long in coming; any answer at all seemed difficult just then, as the two figures silently made their way homewards. The long drooping moustache hid the expression of Andrew's mouth, or Althea would have seen that never was one less cold or stern.

He shook off his lingering earnestness the next moment, and returned to the mood more natural to him—outwardly, at least. Perhaps he thought they had both been grave long enough.

"Miss Holmes," he observed brightly, "there are two sorts of mistakes—the one resulting from the other, but neither worth more than a passing pain. We have both sinned in ignorance this evening; but there is no need to lacerate ourselves afresh, that I can see. If you have sinned against society, we will hoodwink the inexorable old lady, and no harm will be done. If I have sinned against *you*, and am already pardoned, as you say, you may seal my pardon when I tell you that you stand higher in my esteem than any society regulations can place you. There now, will that content you? Or shall I go down on the wet grass and soil the knees of my wedding gear?"

He had his wish, if he wanted to see the cloud lift and the brown eyes dance once more; and of course he was excused his penance.

They were close to the house now, and Andrew added, mischievously, "Shall I *twit*, as the school-children say? This is another score against you on my list. What if I amuse them at the breakfast-table by the 'Tale of the Hobby-horse,' or 'The midnight adventures of the Woman in White'?"

"It is not midnight!" cried Althea, really frightened now, and preparing to rush towards the door; but he checked her.

"Not quite," he said. "No; nonsense; don't be alarmed, but let me think about the best plan. Daisy's window is dark,

so she is sleeping the sleep of the just; Miss Wynton, ditto; ditto Miss Grace—no—stay—there is a gleam lingering there; the house is not all asleep. Seeing, as I said, the days of Eden are over, and nineteenth-century servants talk according to their lights, it would be well not to find them a subject. Supposing as you flit upstairs you are detected, I would rather come and explain for you. I could do it better than you, though not so well as those Goliaths. I will linger here out of sight for five minutes. If at the end of that time you have not lighted your window, I shall know something is amiss, and act accordingly. Now, do you understand?"

"Quite," she answered. "But, Mr. Valender, how about yourself? How shall you get in if you wait too long?"

"Trust number one to take care of himself," he answered lightly, showing the end of a latch-key in his waistcoat pocket. "Besides, Rawlings and the maids have not had their whole fling yet. And now," with a slight return to his former gentleness and gravity, "you are sure you have forgiven me the fright I caused you, and do not want me knocked down on the first opportunity?"

"Perfectly sure. As you said, we have both transgressed in different ways," she replied.

"And you are sure you will think no more of that look you say cut so deeply?"

"No more; that is all set right now."

He still held her hand a moment after she had assured him on both these points. At last, "Then, good night—dear."

It had seemed a long pause before the last word, as though he were searching for just the term he wanted, and could not at once find. Yet when the quiet word came it sounded ineffably sweet; not quite familiar, indeed, either to speaker or listener; almost as new in its untried language as the new character he had assumed the last half-hour, and which *rôle* would be abandoned to-morrow, no doubt. Well, even if it were, and

he could not continue to act as brother when the need for protection was over, it was something to have had this glimpse of another side of his nature to that he often displayed; and it was even more to know that she had his esteem.

Such were Althea's thoughts as she opened the heavy door, and flitted like a white spirit up the dim stairs; once safe in her room, it was the work of a moment to set the beacon-light in her window, and close its curtain for the night. But the busy thoughts ran on long after.

The ache had all gone now; sordid talk was forgotten, and as for the new trouble into which she had run so heedlessly, she had promised not to grieve any more over that. Indeed, there was no reason to grieve when a man like Andrew Valender had assured her of his high esteem. They had had playful bantering freaks before, and had been good friends enough since the first night; but she had not known he thought so well of her; and down there, in the little wood, his manner had had something almost reverent in it, such as she had not known he could feel. Yes, esteem is worth having; and Althea was happy again—almost satisfied. It would not have satisfied most women; they inspired something warmer, more personal, as Louise had done—and Daisy also, for all she knew. Ah, well! she was going to try and read prose with diligence and earnestness, with Edmund to help her; and maybe it would not be all dull reading.

Nevertheless, Althea's closing meditations were not of Edmund, nor of any one's high esteem. What followed her to the borderland of sleep was a quiet "Good night—dear."

But next morning, when she went down, thinking the greeting at the breakfast-table would be rather curious, after the adventure of last night, Andrew's place was empty. "Business" had called him, so old Rawlings testified—a forgotten duty, that must be dispatched immediately—and the young master had ridden off by seven o'clock. At which Miss

Grace chuckled scornfully, as she drew towards her the dish Mr. Valender was to have dispensed.

"'Business,' indeed! About as much of that as the man in the moon has of green-cheese making, and about as many clients as he has dairy-maids!"

CHAPTER IX.

A MAGIC TALE.

"There is a love which sees
Not with the eye, which hears not with
The ears; but in which soul is enamoured
Of soul. It is a love only high
And noble natures can conceive."

BULWER LYTTON.

COULD commonplace routine ever come to them again, had been Althea's inward question the morning before, as she watched Louise passing out of the old life in her bridal loveliness. But the days that succeeded fully answered the question.

Weddings are not exhilarating to those who stay behind and reduce picturesque chaos to prosy order, and readjust the garlands so exquisite yesterday, but that droop a little to-day; and Elm-leigh proved no exception to the general rule.

They all missed sweet Louise, with her innate tact and unselfish ministrations, and some of the little party showed it less pleasantly than others. Frank Conway's bright face, too, was wanting now in an evening, and the breath of busy life he used to bring with him to a dinner-table of ladies. And now that he was no longer to be expected, his friend Valender's business claims seemed to grow more importunate, for he was less often a tenant of the little Elisha-chamber reserved for him at Elm-leigh.

"He thinks we can't exist without him—the mannikin!"

was Miss Grace's testy remark, on the third day of the young man's absence. "As if such a will-o'-the-wisp were worth the weight of a straw. I'd never mope, girls, but take life as it comes."

"Mope, Miss Grace!" cried Daisy, with equal testiness, and some heat; for the old lady's glance had rested on her, though she addressed both. "I should like to know who is moping! I've been far too busy, for my part, to think of anybody but Frank and Louise."

And, indeed, it did look like it; for it was Daisy's aid that had been sought in most of the little after-arrangements, and it was she who helped to steer her hostesses through the tide of callers that soon set in.

Althea did not shine at all at this time. Her pen was apt to spurtle if she essayed notes, and callers were the signal for her to creep stealthily to some garden nook or open window, where she could discourse with more congenial minds through the medium of printer's ink.

Her aunts were content that she should amuse herself in her own fashion; though Althea felt herself to be rather selfish, especially when Daisy's irritability broke out in a most unusual way now and then; at which her companion only wondered in secret, for the girls' intimacy had never passed into friendship. So that, though they were ostensibly companions, it more often fell out that Daisy was to be found at Miss Wynton's side, and Althea with the younger sister; unless, indeed, she were quite alone.

Companionship was far from necessary to Althea—at least, for some hours at a stretch—and in solitary rambles in that beautiful neighbourhood, and in sunny, idle enjoyment of the dear old garden, that first week after Louise's departure was anything but irksome to one member at least of the little circle. Besides, there were home letters to write, now that so much time was allowed her to herself; and many a closely-written page was covered in the little shrubbery alone, where, pensively content, Althea poured out her heart to her

dear ones, and thought, with a bounding heart, of what the meeting with them would be.

Not that she wanted the time of her visit over. It certainly was not that; though she longed ever and anon for a sight of the faces she loved best on earth. She recognized most fully, by this time, that Elm-leigh had its delights, and that the memory of them would make it impossible to take up the old home story just where the last leaf was turned down; that she had found out what it was to "become a part of all she had met;" and this thought often brought back Louise's earnest words, the night before the wedding: "You will understand *then*. You will know that unalloyed happiness is not to be found in this life."

Perhaps Althea already understood. Perhaps it had dawned on her since coming here, that the alloy in Louise's case was the loosening of the sacred home ties, to enter upon the higher and equally God-ordained ones; that in her own it would be that, while cleaving with all her soul to home, she had had a glimpse beyond—"A light that never yet had shone on land or sea"—and that the glimpse was all.

When thoughts like these became too oppressive, the book or pen would slip from her fingers, and she would pace the shrubbery walks till sunshine had come back, with the restful play of light upon the leaves, or the contented chirp of the birds in the branches overhead. And here came Aunt Grace, on one of these mornings, with a plate of seed-cake in one hand, and the *Standard* crushed in the other that grasped the silver-mounted stick, her face broadening into a smile at sight of her young favourite.

"I knew where to find you," she said. "Pacing the walks like a poet or a lunatic—for the two are not far apart, to my thinking. See, this is some of your favourite cake. It smelt irresistibly good as I passed just now, so I filched some from the oven while cook was engaged elsewhere. Seed-cake is never so toothsome, to my mind, as in the morning."

"Oh, auntie; how good of you! This is indeed irresistible." And, re-entering the summer-house, the old and the young lady sat down together, with the plate between them, and munched with content for some minutes.

Miss Grace's face, indeed, was so broadly peaceful under its wide garden hat, that it seemed to form an unconscious confirmation of Althea's previous reflections about prose reading not being all dull and painful. So far as she knew, Aunt Grace had never had even a glimpse of the light that had half-dazzled herself. Was she the happier for this; or was it that people took life so much more lightly in after years? Anyway, the strong, good-humoured face had a bracing effect just then.

Meanwhile the owner of the face, all unconscious of the object-lesson she was forming, having finished discussing her cake, glanced at the closely-written sheets on the rustic table before her.

"That is how you while away long, solitary hours," she said. "I thought it was generally some hundred-year-old book. But you are a good child to put up with a dull visit so patiently. We'll see if we cannot make it a little brighter for you next week, when we are settled down once more. I should think you will never want to come to Elm-leigh again."

"Aunt Grace, how can you talk so? What could I have better than such a holiday-time to read and be idle in? It is you who are good to let me do as I like."

"Well, we won't bandy compliments. I am a poor hand at that. I have brought the paper to see what is going on in the way of amusement; for you shall not go home till you have had a little more sight-seeing. Let us see what the theatres have to tempt one, shall we?"

Althea's heart gave a little leap of excitement at the word "theatres," and she drew nearer, to follow Miss Grace's finger down the column, till, at the words, "*Romeo and Juliet* at 8," her head was lifted straightway, though she did not speak at first.

"Well, is that to be the one?" inquired the old lady; for the sudden rose-colour of the cheeks so near her, and the light in the brown eyes seemed to indicate as much. "It shall be, if you choose. But I should have thought you would like something new."

But Althea turned her back, figuratively speaking, on modern comedy, and, for this first visit, nothing would delight her like Shakespeare. She could hardly believe she was really so soon to have the treat, and her delight and gratitude both amused and touched Miss Grace, who, lame though she was, and easily fatigued, had a good-natured pleasure in gratifying young people, and to whom a day in town had still a secret attraction.

"So you see, you really have been a little dull," she said mischievously. "Your face is altogether different to what it was when I came upon you just now, under the trees."

"I will not have you call it dull," was the reply. "To speak truthfully, I will confess it tried me just a little bit to be within a few miles of so much that is wonderful and enchanting to me, and not to be able to reach it. If I had been fifty miles from the great city, this garden would have been enough—as it is now, almost always. I suppose it is two sides of me that enjoy two utterly different things."

"Well, child, I fear at your age I should have understood the exciting enjoyment the better of the two; but when you come to visit two quiet old ladies, you must not expect great doings. But, come, we will have a very early lunch one of these days—you and Daisy and I—go and see the pictures or something, and finish up with the play; for these long, light days I shall not mind having the charge of you, if our cavalier is not forthcoming. Tell me what you want most to see."

But Althea found it hard to choose. Her imagination roved from cathedral to abbey, from north to south; from city bridges and museums to parks and galleries. She had all the hungry eagerness of a veritable country cousin; and with a

laugh, Aunt Grace abandoned the list she was beginning to make, remarking, "You have cut out enough for a week's hard work at least! I shall have to turn you over to Andrew Valender for an hour or two, I verily believe, if you want to ramble so far."

"No, thank you!" was the quick retort, given so suddenly and decisively that Miss Grace looked surprised; for Althea's face exactly matched her tone, as she half turned away. The idea of Mr. Valender's being pressed into her service, *nolens volens*, was not to be endured. She had not forgotten his evident weariness of the subject of the old brocade, his contemptuous surprise at her twilight wanderings, and his sudden departure the morning following.

Pleasant enough the dawning friendship had been; but perhaps Andrew had felt even that measure of brotherly esteem inconsistent with his implied pledges elsewhere. Perhaps Daisy would not care to share even so small a part of his interest. Anyway, Althea was not the girl to intrude where welcome was uncertain.

Miss Grace raised her eyebrows with a faint smile.

"You agree with me that we spoil him amongst us, and that he shall 'gang his ain gait'?" she asked.

"He shall certainly 'gang his ain gait,'" was the reply; "and, as for London sights, why should not I go alone and have a long morning among them, all to myself? With a map I should not be the least afraid of being lost."

But Elm-leigh ideas were not ripe for such a bold step as yet; and Althea began to think the subject must be tacitly dropped, like that of Beaconsfield, while she failed to be convinced. However, the next morning, to her delighted surprise, she found herself, with Phelps for escort, leaving the Elm-leigh gates, almost at a run, to catch the train, with *carte-blanche* as to time of return and places of interest to be visited; and it is needless to say, she made the most of the longed-for occasion.

Mr. Valender waded through his absorbing business sufficiently to run over to see his Surrey friends next day, and heard of Althea's raid into the city. She had to stand a great deal of good-humoured banter from everybody, at the eagerness and ardour of her proceedings, and even to see the whole circle convulsed with laughter at some pen-and-ink sketches Andrew proceeded to make; but her laughter was as blithe as any, and her enjoyment as keen.

But time was running short, and arrangements were made that night for the visit Miss Grace had discussed with Althea, so the next time they went to town Phelps's services were not required. A call was to be made at Mr. Valender's rooms, to see if he should be at liberty to escort the three to one of the Galleries; but he promised to be in attendance at night, come what would. Accordingly, somewhere about the appointed time, the three arrived on the threshold of the dull London chambers, but only to find, to their disappointment, that Mr. Valender was engaged; whereupon, Miss Grace, rather hot and puffed with the exertion of climbing a steep staircase, ejaculated, with some irritability—

"A client! Dear me, young man, I should think such a phenomenon should be preserved in spirits of wine! It is what one does not see here every day."

The young clerk received this thrust with a dignity that recalled Miss Grace to a sense of her indecorum, even before Daisy's indignant protest fell on her ear.

"How can you make such remarks, Miss Grace?" she asked, as soon as they regained *terra firma*. "However little you may think of Mr. Valender's business capacity, I think it is most ill-timed to lower any one in the eyes of his subordinate. I think it was a great mistake."

Miss Grace replied with unusual mildness—

"So I think, too, child. I always do, for that matter, when the mischief's done. However, there's no great harm done; the little clerk knows me well enough, and

my random tongue, too. And now we'll make for the New Gallery."

Andrew kept his appointment with becoming good faith, and was in ample time to devote an hour or two to his lady-friends, before escorting them to the play. He and Daisy looked content enough, as they sat listening to the overture, side by side; and Miss Grace, who seldom left the retirement of home nowadays, had ample food for entertainment, in gazing through her opera-glass at the assembled company; while Althea, at the end beyond Miss Grace, with eyes rivetted on the curtain that was so soon to rise on a different world to the one around, found the old lady's audible remarks a little trying.

But, ah me! a truce to the wretched slavery of conventionality! The overture is ending; the curtain is slowly rising. Farewell to everyday life and nineteenth-century ideas! Aunt Grace and Daisy and Mr. Valender fade out of memory for the moment as if they had never existed, as the eager little country girl opens eyes, and ears, and heart, drinking in the magic tale of Verona at every pore of her being.

Miss Grace whispered a few comments at first, but soon found she spoke to heedless ears, and a smile passed between her companions at the sight of Althea's absorption. It was not Althea, indeed, who sat beside them there; at least it was only her outward form—the real Althea was away there in Verona streets, living the whole drama through as only an imaginative nature can live it, and that but once in a lifetime.

Let her enjoy it in her own way—with flushed cheek, and parted lips, and bated breath. If she ever enter a theatre a second time, disillusion will have done its work, and it will not be Verona at all—only a painted picture of it, on a hot London stage.

How they fight—those Montagues and Capulets! How the quick Southern blood leaps up, at a fancied insult, past

all entreaty of their lady-wives, till the magnificent prince quells the unseemly brawl with a word each dares not disobey! Ah! and here, into the circle of his friends, comes Romeo, with the same Southern blood all aflame, but from passion of another kind. How near the fountains of love and hate would seem to lie, in those fiery Italian natures!

But hush—hush! Let even *thought* be silent now, and bow before the beauteous vision that rises in the moonlight, rapt in dreams! It is not Juliet alone that breathes her vows upon the evening air. It is the voice of Young Love—old as Time, yet young as yesterday; strong in perennial youth, because she is Nature's own offspring. And should her voice ever become unintelligible, it will be time for the poor worn-out world to crumble to its fall.

It will not yet, seemingly. How comes it else, that the fall of a pin would have been an intrusion on the silence, broken only by those two impassioned voices, while even matter-of-fact people forget to whisper, so long as that peerless form hovers in the moonbeams?

A page, a sentence from the book of Truth and Reality, will find its way to the heart, be it uttered where it will. It is when we counterfeit Nature, and try to be, instead of *being*, that we have to complain of the ill-success of our message.

Just once in the scene, and only once, did Althea turn her head, impelled to seek an answering look, as the old stories at home impelled her when their culminating point was reached. Miss Grace happened to be gazing intently through her glass at the moment, and Daisy's face was averted, so the only one to meet the mute appeal was Mr. Valender, and his eyes at least had an answering glance.

Such a look had not passed between them since that strange moment over the old brocade, when Althea's hidden charms had first shone out under the influence of his enthusiastic insight; she had been so bewildered, so self-conscious then, that her glance had fallen instantly, unable to meet the homage

of his eyes; but it was different now. She no more thought of herself at this moment, than of any one around; the appeal in those speaking eyes of hers was directed to the nearest answering face, whosesoever it might be; and if it happened to be Mr. Valender's, it was no great wonder that, as he had expressed it before, he interpreted what he found.

Perhaps there is no more powerful attraction between comparative strangers than a glance of mutual sympathy over some high thought or ennobling aspiration; self being forgotten, the earnest look between two such natures is a revelation—a language without need of words. It does not necessarily imply friendship, much less love, though it may lead to either; but such a mutual look expresses a brotherhood of soul that overleaps all distinction of age, or sex, or rank, and says, "Our spirits have seen the same thing of beauty; in that, at least, we are one."

> "All my fortunes at thy foot I'll lay,
> And follow thee, my lord, throughout the world."

That was what had brought Althea's face round to seek Miss Grace's in the moment of her enthusiasm; for, although she knew the play well, it had an added splendour this first strange night, and came as a triumphant confirmation of her own impression, that Mrs. Blakeney's ideas were low and false, and that the world was *not* the pitiful thing she had made out.

Would Juliet have given that answer to Tybalt or Paris, if either had just happened to come first and ask for her? And Romeo—was he careful about Capulet's purse-strings, before he carried his suit to his fair love, beneath her window? Would either of them change their minds if a better opportunity presented itself?

"Oh no, no!" thought Althea; "there are still heroines in the world besides those upon the Academy walls; there are still constant Juliets to be found, and unmercenary Romeos, and I will keep my first faith in human nature."

And then those hopeful, eloquent eyes of hers met Andrew

Valender's, and when she turned again to the stage, Juliet had withdrawn.

And Poetry had withdrawn too, soon after, and Commonplace as usual thrust itself in upon a radiant evening. Juliet was scarcely laid to rest in the vault, when Althea was startled by Miss Grace whispering loudly—

"Now, child, we must make haste to catch our train. We are going out before the crush begins; come as quietly as you can."

And then quite suddenly they left Verona, and plunged into England: into a draughty vestibule that set Miss Grace coughing; into a lighted street with dashing cabs, and drizzling rain, that had come on unexpectedly; into a dull station, with themselves ensconced at last in the cozy railway carriage, muffled up in wraps and shawls; with Mr. Valender leaning in at the window for last words, and wet umbrellas passing every moment; and cross, tired people hurrying to get seats.

"Yes, it was very good," Daisy was saying in her pretty dulcet tones; "R—— made a better Juliet than I expected, though of course she could not come up to Ellen Terry. But she looked almost better than she acted. Frank says she cannot be far off forty, so it is wonderful what art will do, for she would pass for about half that age."

"*Forty!*" ejaculated Althea from her corner. It was the first remark she had made, and the astonishment of the tone set them all laughing, though it seemed only to increase, instead of diminish, her own disappointment.

"It could not be, Daisy. It is a libel on her beauty," she urged. "I was looking at her all the time, so I will keep my own opinion."

"You did not use the opera-glass, dear," replied Daisy, complacently. "Powders and cosmetics, as well as distance, lend enchantment; but never mind—it is consoling to think what help is waiting for us, when the time comes for us to need artificial bloom ourselves."

"You have taken the bloom off Althea's peach," remarked Miss Grace; "it was a pity to do that. Never mind, child, whether she's twenty or forty. I dare say she is refreshing herself bountifully after her labours; and it is we poor supperless creatures, getting home in the morning grey, that deserve the pity. I believe we should have had time after all, Andrew, to get something, as you suggested; but I was so afraid of losing the train, and Rawlings will be in no pleasant humour, as it is. Dear me! I could envy Felicia in her first peaceful sleep! Well, boy, you may as well close the window, and say good night. You will run down and see us before long, I suppose?"

So he took the hint and raised the glass, bidding them all good night.

"You will not let paint and powder spoil your paradise?" he remarked good-naturedly to Althea, the last minute, as he took her hand.

"They shall never even enter it," was the decided reply.

And before he had time to ask her meaning, the train was in motion, and Miss Grace was arranging herself in her corner for a half-hour's nap.

CHAPTER X.

IN COOL GROT.

"Perhaps the most delightful friendships are those in which there is much agreement, much disputation, and yet more personal liking."—GEORGE ELIOT (*Felix Holt*).

"Our little lives are kept in equipoise
By opposite attractions and desires!
The struggle of the instinct that enjoys,
And the more noble instinct that aspires."

LONGFELLOW.

ALTHEA set off next morning for a ramble alone. She wanted to think over things, and adjust her ideas; and, besides, she had a letter from Edmund in her pocket, which she had saved to enjoy undisturbed, and which she took out now and read, walking slowly along in the retired spots of the road. They were wanting her back again, it was very easy to see; Ted's little domestic details would have had a pathetically humdrum tone, had it not been for the deep well of home love and affection that watered the roots of everyday life there, and thus kept the humblest actions fresh and sweet.

Yet, in spite of the home affection that breathed in every line, Althea smiled and sighed at the same time, as she put her letter away; then took it once more out, to touch it with her lips a moment, as though she had wronged dear old Ted to wish *anything* different to what it was. Yet—oh! the opposites of life! Last night, under Juliet's balcony—thrilling under every syllable of her low musical tones; turning suddenly to

meet those grave grey eyes so near her own, and to look one long half-minute—mind to mind, and soul to soul, into another's nature—to-day to hear Kitty had had another bad fit, and had been in bed two days, and—well, Althea knew by sad experience that meant extra work for the others, and, worst of all, for the mother who would never rest while others worked.

"Dear Mamsey!" the girl murmured, half aloud; then began to walk very fast indeed, as if it helped flagging resolution. "It is all quite plain," she continued; "my life is to be a prose one, so I will accept it, and leave any chance poetry to come without seeking it. And I don't think—I mean, I *think* I won't go to any more theatres, even if I have the chance. Daisy takes them naturally—they are part of her world, and they don't intoxicate her as they do me; and, after all, Juliet seems more true to nature in this sweet morning sunshine, in my own little Shakespeare, than covered in rouge under the electric light. Anyway, I may as well think so, for the grapes are sour, and my world is far away from theatres; I will munch my wild grapes instead, and they will perhaps grow sweet in time."

"Why, child," cried Miss Grace, an hour later, as Althea appeared in the dining-room and found them all at lunch, "where have you been, to get a face like the rising sun? Come, sit down at once; we are going a long drive directly."

"I believe I've been walking rather fast, and forgot the dog-days were so close upon us," was the reply. "Excuse me, Aunt Felicia"—with a glance to the head of the table, as, tossing her hat aside, Althea gladly sat down, and plunged into the cool stewed fruit Daisy passed to her,—"I've walked myself hungry as well as hot, but both evils are likely to be remedied, seemingly."

Miss Wynton smiled, as she often did nowadays, at her niece's little ways.

"'Everything in earnest,' that is your motto, Althea," she

said,—"from London streets to fruit and cake. But if you live twice as much as other people over little things, what about the great things when they come? I half envy you your amount of pleasure in trifles, but we must wish you smooth sailing, or life will go hardly with you."

"I don't know about great things, Aunt Felicia," was the girl's reply. "Sometimes it seems to me, life is made up of very little things from first to last, and they may want as much strength to get through as one sharp pain quickly over. But I'll have some cake, please," she added; and the schoolgirl appetite reassured the old ladies, who had detected something despondent in the tone just before. They were not in the secret of Kitty's indisposition, and the chain of which it formed a small but tangible link; and they did not know the train of Althea's morning meditations after her first visit to the play.

Miss Grace looked at her keenly for a moment, however, as the cake rapidly disappeared; then smiled contentedly. "As to wishing you smooth sailing," she said, "I do not know whether we need do that; you have a bit of fibre in you, I think, that some slight tacking about might help rather than hinder; and as long as you can appreciate good things as you have done just now, you won't go far wrong. Now, will a long drive be another good thing, do you think? Because we are all going in half an hour."

Althea had no doubt about its desirability, and bounded off as only lithe limbs like hers can move, to prepare herself; yet a chance word of Daisy's, as they met in her room before going down, changed affairs for them both, in a way they little foresaw.

"Not go, Althea!" she exclaimed in surprise; "why, we shall see such pretty country, and the calls won't take up all the time! And as to the Blakeneys, where we shall have tea, most likely, there is always something nice going on—tennis, very probably, for the 'laddies' are at home now, from college,

and they make delightful fun. Come; you don't know what you will miss."

But not even the "laddies," as Mrs. Blakeney pleasantly called her nephews, had any weight in the scale; or perhaps they even turned it the wrong way, for nothing would induce Althea to subject herself to the risk of more matrimonial advice. So she watched the old horse out of the gates with a little sigh, and then took book and work to the shrubbery alcove, thinking anew that people like Daisy had the easiest time after all, taking to the life they were born to, as ducks take to water.

"But I am not born to it, so it does not matter. Nothing will ever convince me that a round of chit-chat calls is a sensible way of spending this glorious summer afternoon; even with such a sop at the end of it as a game of tennis with white-flannelled 'laddies,' and a smiling old auntie beaming and gossiping the while."

So this hyper-sensible young woman resolved she had idled enough lately, and would write her brother a long account of the theatre, and then fix the day for her return home; that done satisfactorily, she took a pair of Daisy's gloves to mend for her, and some needlework of her own, besides a volume for indulgence later on; and visiting the Gloire de Dijon *en route* for the shrubbery, was soon content, in her own quiet fashion, the subtle fragrance of the flowers she had fastened in her dress forming a sort of dreamy under-current to the flow of her meditations.

But they were interrupted before long by the click of the rustic door, and the sight of a familiar figure strolling towards her, on the winding pathway under the elms. No disagreeable sight by any means, and yet Althea was foolish enough to be a trifle fluttered and dismayed. Somehow this man had come a little too near her inner life, once or twice, to permit their intercourse to continue on quite the common and ordinary footing, except indeed in the presence of others. But here—

here—on the very spot on which she had received her lecture on propriety! Perhaps it was the very fear of quicksands which made her assume an air of carelessness she by no means felt, as she gave him her hand, with a sincere regret that he should have had a fruitless errand, and found the household all away.

Mr. Valender bore the announcement with such fortitude, and with such entire freedom from constraint, that it went far towards relieving his companion of all embarrassment. She was glad, certainly, for those first moments, that she had brought her embroidery, as it made things easier; yet, as she stitched vigorously, she could not forget all in a moment that Daisy ought to be here; and that, possibly, she herself would have been better, just then, rolling along in the old family carriage, or even smarting under Mrs. Blakeney's pleasantries, than entertaining Daisy's friend all alone in the summer-house. Conscious innocence is a wonderful safeguard, however, and that misgiving faded almost immediately. Andrew took the seat opposite her, for reasons of his own, instead of the one at her side; but, even so, space in the rustic little bower was very limited, and the needle flew more vigorously than before.

"But I'm not quite clear yet," Andrew was saying; "you don't mean to say you are left at home mending Daisy's trumpery, while she and the rest go driving?"

Althea's only answer at first was to spread the dainty little glove upon her knee, and smooth out every finger for his approval. "There, Mr. Valender," she said, at last, "if that is trumpery, may I never want such all the days of my life! No, indeed," she went on, as she gathered up the silks, and folded the offending gloves, "I am no martyr at all; only a very perverse and self-willed girl, who resisted Daisy's pleadings to share her pleasure, because it would not be any pleasure to myself. It is entirely by my own choice that I stayed behind, when I found the long drive meant a round of calls."

"Is paying calls no pleasure, then?" asked her companion. "I imagined you rather enjoyed conversation."

"Mr. Valender," began Althea, with a sudden little gesture of weariness, as her work dropped in her lap, and her hands went behind her head in the way peculiar to her when she and her brothers hammered out their theories at home—"do you know, I think it is time I went back to Harington? I get quite tired of being so unlike other people, and surprising them by my manners and customs. As to conversation, I like *that;* nothing is more delightful than real, rational, enjoyable talk: but is that your experience when you go on a round of calls?—or is it the privilege of your sex to be spared them altogether?"

"I must plead guilty to a card-case," he rejoined, with a laugh, "even though it is rarely on duty. And when it is, I must confess to finding Platos and Sphynxes in the minority. But come, nothing can be more unconventional than the present style of things, so it will suit us both exactly. I come, minus a card, and call on Miss Holmes in her sylvan retreat; enter unannounced, and without even an invitation: now what is to prevent a real, rational, enjoyable conversation? Except, indeed, the possible inability of one of the party to fulfil such requirement. However, one never knows what he can do till he tries. Please open the subject; you shall be another Madame de Staël, if you like, and I will do my best to follow you on the lines of rationality."

Of course the subject was not forthcoming; and I think Madame de Staël would have had more self-possession than to bend over her needlework with such renewed assiduity, and that her cheeks would not have taken such a shy rose tint before any of her intellectual votaries. Perhaps Mr. Valender had chosen an opposite seat because, when his companion did at intervals raise her head, he could not miss the changing light of her eyes; he was watching her now with a most amused glance. But they were as far as ever from the sensible discourse; indeed, this banter had reduced Althea to silence.

Well, even silence was pleasant enough this warm, delicious afternoon, with an occasional bee droning by, and a girlish figure opposite one, in a cool white dress, with cream roses in her bosom, and a very decided expression on her countenance. And still with that amused look on his face, and peculiar content at his heart, Andrew drew out his fusees, and the next instant was in the full luxury of a fragrant cigar, that mingled with, and scarcely disturbed the subtler perfume of the roses, as the thin wreaths curled away out of the open framework at his side.

"I beg your pardon," he began, after a moment or two of enjoyment; "I ought to have asked permission first. Do you object?"

He certainly was taken by surprise at the answer that came, instead of the quick disclaimer he had expected. A low reluctant answer, if such it could be called, and the tone was quite unlike its former freedom.

"I am glad you did not forget it altogether."

She said it as if she meant it, too, in spite of the manifest effort it cost; for shy as the voice was, and half-smiling as was the face, there was no coquetry in either, and her colour rose high before she had finished. As to her companion, his face was sufficient index to his astonishment—perhaps to some slight chagrin, for Althea's colour was reflected for one instant in his usually pale cheek, and the next, with an emphatic apology, the cigar was lying yards away, under the elm branches.

It surprised himself that he was not angry in this novel position of being gravely reproved by a woman younger than himself; yet, how came it that a mere chit, an unfledged school-girlish creature like this (for Althea was years behind her age in most things) made him feel abashed in a way he had never done before? Mr. Valender's free and easy ways were so well understood by his friends, that it is probable he had never in his life before been touched on such a tender

point. The only person who ever lectured him was Miss Grace, and he never felt her hardest thrusts in the peculiar way this little reminder went home; and yet, strange to say, the first mortification was giving way to a sense of increased respect, before the flush had left his cheek.

"Why did you do that?" asked Althea, as the tiny light expired on a mossy bed six yards away.

"Because it was disagreeable to you, of course," he replied. "There is scarcely need to ask that question."

"Now, that is what I call leaping to conclusions," rejoined Althea. "A cigar was under discussion, it is true, but only as an illustration of the subject of the moment, which is over and forgotten by now. Oblige me, Mr. Valender, by fetching that discarded thing and resuming it, if you want us to talk."

"Not for a thousand worlds," he replied, emphatically. "If I have acted like an unmannerly bear, it is not every one who would pull me up so discreetly; and I owe you thanks for my lesson."

"Now you are angry with me for my presumption."

"Never less so in my life, I assure you."

"Prove it, then, by relighting your cigar, and being comfortable in your own way."

"Even by spoiling *your* comfort? You do indeed place me on a low level, Miss Holmes."

"I don't know what is to be done," was Althea's perplexed remark, as she cast her eyes to the roof of the alcove, as if for inspiration. "Here is a man making a martyr of himself, and going without indescribable delight, merely because he *will* misunderstand; unless, indeed, he is thoroughly offended. But, Mr. Valender," she added, dropping her jesting strain, "if I spoke too freely just now, I am very sorry; you should not wilfully misunderstand. I only said I was glad that you remembered what was due to me. And so I was—all the more glad, perhaps, because—because—— But, come, I am going to fetch that myself. There! it is as clean from the

moss as if it had only dropped on the table-cloth. If you will not finish it, I shall feel that I have spoilt your afternoon."

He smiled as he took it from her, but still paused. "You are an enigma to me," he said,—"a riddle harder to read than some. Have you really no dislike to smoke?"

"I am not going into so wide a subject, Mr. Valender. All I know is that one special cigar is of the mildest description, and the sooner you light it the more satisfied I shall be."

"Only upon one condition, then. You broke off in the middle of something I want to hear. 'You were glad,' you said; 'all the more glad, because——' Because of what? Promise to finish that, and then I will do as you wish, since you insist on it."

"I will promise, then, if it must be so, though it is not worth mentioning; and perhaps you will take it amiss, so I only do it under protest. Now, having bound me by so many promises, are you ready to fulfil yours by beginning to smoke —if, indeed, such ethereal vapour can be called smoke, and not incense."

"Quite ready, but, like you, under protest. There! now I am waiting for your part of the bargain."

And the more difficult one, it would seem, for Andrew had taken several thoughtful puffs before his companion could bring herself to begin; and her face was so wistful all the time, it could not fail to soften the effect of harsher words than those that came at last.

"It was only," she began, "that I have wondered a little—just a little, you know—several times, at your manner towards —well, towards all the women I have seen here, but especially towards Aunt Felicia. Please do not misunderstand: I am not in the world, you know; and no doubt its ways are very different to my ideas, so it does not strike other people as it does me. Only it was so new to me, so unlike any one I have ever seen, so different to Frank Conway even, that it seemed strange to me at first. But, as I said, the code I have been

used to is behind the age, and no doubt I surprise others as much as you did me."

"Wait a moment," he put in here; "I want to understand. You mean I seemed rude, and——"

"No, no, Mr. Valender; it is hard to explain myself as it is, and you must not make my task harder. Not rude—a little cool perhaps; but that is nothing at all, and nobody minds it, because you are at heart a gentleman, as one can see in a moment. It is when you choose your own way rather than giving up to elderly women like my aunts; when you—sometimes—slight them (and especially Aunt Felicia, who dotes upon you so), and all before *us*, or even before servants like Phelps—it was that that make me wonder a little. So when you remembered to ask my leave about your cigar just now, I meant that I was glad *because* you remembered; not that I wanted to rob you of your enjoyment. There! you *would* have all this, and now you are angry, and I am sorry."

He glanced at her glowing cheeks and wistful eyes when the halting sentences were done, and saw she spoke the truth. For one moment his face wore that earnest expression it had taken when she had appealed, on the very spot, against his hasty judgment on her late rambles; he seemed on the verge of replying with an earnestness greater even than her own: but now, as then, something changed his purpose, and, his eye happening to fall on a little worn volume half hidden by the working materials, his old self returned instantly.

"Ah! I guessed as much," he cried, as he drew Althea's "Shakespeare" from its retirement, and held it up, with a laugh. "I thought the stitching element was something too novel to be quite natural. See how the leaves fall open of their own accord at the scene of last night's performance! You were too happy *then* to answer any questions about its success; but I should like to know if it bears the daylight. Did Daisy take the bloom off the peach by her rouge-pot revelations, as Miss Grace thought?"

Althea knitted her brows and thought a moment before replying. Just now her face had been troubled under the fear of giving pain, but it changed instantly with the change of theme, and she was her old natural self once more; she had forgotten all about Madame de Staël and the invitation to a rational discourse, so was no longer hampered by self-consciousness.

"I was disappointed at first," she said slowly, as her hands came up behind her head again, in the old fashion. "Of course I had heard long ago about the 'make-up' of an actress, but somehow I forgot it last night, so it was a shock just at first. After all, though, it does not affect Juliet, you know,—the real Juliet,—because she is a bit of human nature."

"But so was her representative! Come, Miss Holmes, your argument won't hold water, you see."

"I think it will," she went on, still with knitted brows and thoughtful face. "You asked if the success of last night bore the light of to-day, and I answer—yes and no. Everything true and natural must and will do so. It is not because some faces choose to take an artificial bloom that they cease to be human nature; the daylight shows them to be other than they seemed, but not the less human for that. So, if I met R—— to-day in the full sunshine, and found her to be twenty years older than she seemed, I should admit *that* part would not bear daylight."

"So much for the *con*," said Andrew, with an inward thought of Madame de Staël, that he wisely kept to himself. "Now, an it please you (if we must be Shakespearian), we will have the *pro*. Tell me what part does stand the test."

"I have no need to tell you, Mr. Valender," she answered. "You know as well as I do. I saw it in your face that minute when—— I mean, Shakespeare's characters are true as truth itself: the dress changes with years, and the speech, and some of the ideas; but you feel just as much as I do that they will always bear the light."

"You saw it in my face, you say? When Juliet swore to follow her lord throughout the world, do you mean? I wonder *what* you saw in my face, or rather what I saw in *yours*, young lady! That you believed in her with all your might and main—I saw that."

"I did; I do. You may pretend to laugh at her, Mr. Valender, but you do also, at heart."

"Do I really? How do you know I was not carried away by the glamour of the scene, infected by your enthusiasm, and that the daylight has not been too much for me, and brought me back to sober sense and reality?"

Althea looked for a moment as if she were losing faith in him, and her face fell.

"Tell me first what *is* sober reality," she said quietly, after an involuntary pause.

"Well, do you think the Juliets of to-day are quite so impassioned and self-forgetting? I must crave pardon for saying such unromantic things; but behind the scenes, you know, with his mother and sisters, a man hears home truths sometimes. And as to flinging themselves and their fortunes at any one's feet, I thought it was a much cooler and more speculative proceeding, with such horrid whispers as *settlements* audible now and again. Ready to be wooed, I grant you; ready to follow you all the world over—after a grand wedding; but somehow—do you know?—these fair promises seem to me a little like Mrs. Micawber's idea of self-denial. She will never desert Mr. Micawber. Excellent woman! But what if it were the other way, and it was in reality Mr. Micawber who would not desert *her?*"

"You won't make me angry," murmured Althea, when he paused at last for breath, and glanced at her with dancing eyes; she looked so subdued that the teazing lost half its fun. "I could show you another picture to that, if I cared to do it. I could prove to you that there are women in living reality who have fulfilled those promises already; who, I verily

believe, could die to help those they loved. Keep your sorrowful creed if you will, Mr. Valender; but while I live I will keep mine."

And, rising from her seat, with a heightened colour in her cheeks, and something very tremulous about the mouth, Althea turned from him as if to go, but he put her gently back again, in the old masterly way.

"Forgive me," he said; "I was half in jest, and only wish the other half could be proved all a mistake and a delusion. Believe me, I have not lost all my faith; nay, if you could restore in any measure what sad experience has taken from me, I should owe you more than you can understand. Who was the woman to whom you referred? Your cousin Louise? Tell me."

"It was my mother," she said, simply. The voice was low and soft, and something almost reverent had come into the tone, just as it had done on this same spot before, when he had hurt her so; and, as then, the effect upon him was strange enough to keep him silent a little while.

"Tell me about her," he said at last. "I would give much to know. How has she fulfilled your ideal in the way you described?"

"I could not tell you," she answered. "To make you understand, you would have to have lived beside her all your life, as I have done; never hearing a word of her sacrifices—from her own lips, at least; always seeing her bright and happy, and only discovering little by little, as you grew up, what she had foregone. I was thinking of her last night when I turned my head to see if it struck Aunt Grace in the same way, and met your eyes instead."

Both voices had dropped involuntarily to a low half-tender tone, and Andrew's face was as grave now as that of his companion.

"Forgive me," he said, hesitating; "do not answer me if you would rather not. But—has your mother given up so much, that you speak of sacrifices? She is happy, is she not?"

"Happy! yes, indeed," cried Althea, earnestly. "My father is a good man, and a devoted husband, and we all love each other; there is no question about happiness. Still, there are such things as sacrifices, even in the happiest home, and we children are old enough to see now what our mother has done, and what she has made our life. It is not for me to tell you all that. Aunt Felicia and Aunt Grace know something about it; but surely you guess the reason why my mother was not here to see our Louise married? She is no Mrs. Micawber, I assure you, Mr. Valender."

It was a relief to speak more lightly, and so they both felt. Andrew half understood to what she referred, and longed to ask further questions; but the subject was too delicate a one. Yet he could not resist the inquiry, "Does she never come to Elm-leigh, then?"

"Never. She has never once seen her old home since she married my father; in one sense you were right, you see, though she carries out what she does not put into words. She will never desert Mr. Micawber."

"Don't," he said, gently. "Forget that flippant speech of mine—I sinned in ignorance. It was well for me, though, that those terrible Goliaths of yours were not within earshot, or I fear it would have gone hardly with me. Would they have been very bloodthirsty, do you think?"

"I think they would, if they fancied it touched mother or me," was the laughing reply; "though, by the way, your name for them is rather misplaced. Edmund—*my* brother, as I always call him—is not nearly so tall as myself, and as quiet and cool as possible. Jack is taller, but so slender and boyish, that the name they have given me would do equally well for him—that of a Beanstick. Ah! how long it seems since I heard the old familiar name! But I shall be with them all again in two more days; Edmund says there must be no lingering on after the month is over."

"Not even to go to the play once more?" he asked.

"Not even for that, or anything, Mr. Valender. I have been playing, in one sense, every day since I came to Elm-leigh, and I fear it has cost the others something the while, for they must have missed me. And now Edmund tells me that Kitty has been ill again, and I dread to think of mother, and what she has been doing."

Andrew's face looked as mystified as if he had been listening to some unintelligible language.

"Kitty!" he ejaculated,—"is that another daughter? I thought you were the only one."

Althea broke out into a peal of laughter. "Oh! I wish you could see my sister Kitty," she cried. "I don't think you would trace much likeness between us—at least, I hope not. She is about half my height, and has a slight cast, and snuffles a good deal, especially when she is nervous, or out of temper. No, Mr. Valender, she is our dear old Abigail, who came to mother when she first began housekeeping, and has lingered on all these years; partly from love to us all (though she is horribly cross sometimes), and partly from a difficulty in getting another situation, because of her liability to fits. So she begs us to keep her on, and has become quite an institution; as we are all used to her seizures, they do not alarm us as they might other people; and she stays with us almost for nothing. Still, it *is* trying during her attacks to have to do everything for ourselves; and I do wish she could have waited till I got home."

Mr. Valender did not seem to be making much progress with the language, to judge by his looks. It was indeed a new world to him, this glimpse of a household where any maladies of any conceivable Kitty could be of such importance. He did not know which to wonder at most—the almost feudal devotion of Kitty that bound her to her mistress in spite of such scant remuneration, or the forbearance that retained her fitful services at such manifest inconvenience.

"But what about reinforcements?" he asked, when his

astonishment found voice at last. "Surely Harington has other Kittys in reserve for emergencies; one or two of whom could fill a void when required."

Althea shook her head with a laughing gesture.

"You cannot comprehend," she said. "The Castle Street problem can only be solved by experience, so no wonder you are at fault. But as too many cooks spoil the broth, so would too many Kittys spoil the week's expenses; and we have learned to subtract rather than to multiply at our home. As for us, we enjoy learning things by experience, now and then, that is; but once we very nearly——. No," added Althea, "I won't tell you that, on second thoughts."

"Miss Holmes," cried Andrew, abruptly, "do you know you have the oddest way of whetting curiosity, by leading one up to the point, and then flying off at a tangent, just when the tale is in full swing. Have you ever heard of the old woman who went '*Ooseberry* picking? Because I believe you have taken a leaf out of her book."

"Who was she?" asked Althea, perplexed.

"You deserve to be treated in your own fashion; but I will be more merciful. She figures at Christmas parties and such-like festivities, though what place '*ooseberries* would take in the floral or vegetable world is beyond my knowledge; the main interest centres in the old lady herself. One of the party volunteers to relate her adventures, but always breaks off under some pretext or other, at the '*ooseberry* point; and at last you find out, when sufficiently irritated by delay, that her whole history is comprised in the fact of her going for those particular berries, and that her after career is a blank. Two or three times this one afternoon you have led me on some such track, only I will admit there was a sequence in *your* accounts."

"It was very silly of me," she faltered, "I had no such intention. But I stopped just now because——" Then, seeing by his twinkling eyes that she was caught in her own trap, she went on, desperately, "Because I felt rather ashamed

to go on; and besides, Louise would not like it, I know. However, I will remember the 'ooseberry picker. It was once when Louise was visiting here, and Kitty had a worse and longer attack than usual, and we were sadly exercised, for we dislike strangers about us too often. So, when my father and the boys were gone, mother and I got into mischief by resolving to try a new departure. We had learnt heaps of things before, but this time we were bent on learning to be our own charwomen. We did laugh over it so—at first. But before long we both found it not quite such fun, and were labouring painfully along, when who should come in upon us but Edmund, who had returned for some trifle left behind. Oh, how angry he was! With poor Mamsey a little, but more with me, for allowing her to do it; he just carried our household appliances away himself, and would not go back to his office till he had forced a solemn promise from us both, never to touch such work again. And when father heard of it he almost cried; he takes things so to heart that we keep him in the dark as much as we can; he recalls the day he ran away with mother from her boarding-school, and blames himself for it. But Kitty's wrath was the worst of all, when she was well enough to come down again. She had never scolded us so much since the day, many years before, when mother attempted the cooking while Kitty was laid by. She came to herself in time to find the joint in the oven, swimming in the water, which Mamsey, with a fond fancy it would turn to gravy, had poured over it; she told mother she had 'just *drownded* the meat.' This time, however, she declared the pails were her own property, and should be locked up when she was not by; and for a long time she kept her word, thereafter putting them in safe custody whenever she found herself ailing."

Althea's cheeks were aflame before she had finished her homely tale, and she wished her tongue had not run away with her so fast; she could not help laughing heartily, all

the same—it was such an odd experience for a man like Mr. Valender to hear about scrubbing and cooking. But it was a long way from *Romeo and Juliet*, and last night's enthusiasm; and involuntarily she rose and led the way homeward.

"One minute longer, please, Miss Holmes." And glancing at his face, Althea was surprised to see how grave it was, and that it was his turn to be embarrassed now; this curious story of Kitty and Kitty's mistresses, and the *drownded* meat, and the locked-up property, and the husband struggling with difficulties, had no comedy in them now, for him.

This light let in upon lives so different to his own—so cheerful in their acceptance of suffering, so strong in each other's affection, so resolute to make the best of their small opportunities of good—showed his own sadly dark by contrast; and conscience was so accusing, as it recalled long wasted months and years, that the need of justification rose within him, with an intensity never felt before.

"I put off replying to your candid remarks about my behaviour to Miss Felicia, and now it seems even harder to speak than it did," he began, with an effort; "but I must do so. Yes" (as Althea's face looked distressed, and a little deprecatory gesture escaped her), "it is for my own relief I do it, if you can be patient a moment. I will not weary you longer than that. Miss Holmes, I expect you have heard rumours about my supposed prospects—of my expectations from Miss Wynton, in fact."

"Yes, I have heard of them," she answered faintly.

"It is not a pleasing subject to discuss," he went on, observing her hesitation. "Think, then, what it must be for me to have it following me wherever I go, like my own shadow—gossiped from mouth to mouth—every action attributed to that motive, so that I cannot even come to see my old friends here, but everybody, down to the lowest servant, supposes I am looking ahead with an eye to business. Even in the city I am

badgered with it by those who know me, so that I cannot follow my natural bent and be lazy, but it is said—'Ah, Valender, you lucky dog! you can afford the luxury of idleness.' Even my mother and sister share the general idea, and I cannot mention having been here, but Mildred will smile under her eyelashes, and make some passing remark about my having been to do my duty. It would be hard enough if the expectations were immense (they *do* get wonderfully exaggerated by rumour); but when it is all for the few paltry thousands poor Cousin Felicitas has to leave behind her, it is just exasperating; I feel half disposed to say, now and then—'Hang the money, and me after it, if I'll touch a penny!' I have heard my motives under-rated for so long, that sometimes I cannot separate my real self from the long-sighted individual they give me credit for being, and am almost ready to believe that I do come after the tin, and to keep the old lady in good humour. When this is so, I am cool and almost rude, as you have observed. 'If they think me a money-grubber' (I say to myself), 'at least they shall never call me a fawning hypocrite;' and if Miss Wynton see fit to change her mind after one of my outbreaks, she shall be free to do so."

There was no need now to stay Althea's steps; she stood listening in wondering sympathy to this sudden confidence, but her face had sufficient encouragement in it, as she exclaimed—

"Oh! I am so sorry for what I said! It must indeed be a painful position for you. Then, Mr. Valender, do you really not care anything for Aunt Felicia's money?"

He raised his eyebrows deprecatingly with a slight return of his old lightness. "Now, it is *your* turn to jump to conclusions," he said. "There are many degrees of variation between the high-minded hero and the mercenary knave, are there not, Miss Holmes? Can't you find me a place somewhere midway between the two? This much I know, however, that if only I had a competence by my profession, and some little

margin besides for extra comforts and emergencies, dear old Miss Felicia might leave her every penny to some charity, for all I should object; and then I should be free to return her affection in my own way, without suspicion."

"*That's right*," cried Althea, and her eyes glowed—kindling for a minute, as they had done last night under another sort of inspiration. There was almost triumph in their gladness; the light that any man will be the better for meeting in the eyes of any woman—best of all, when she is fair and young. "Ah! I knew you were not what you tried to make yourself appear. I was certain you believed in goodness as well as I! But, Mr. Valender, let me speak this once, without fear of offence. Why not strive for the results you long for? Why not win the competence you spoke of, and be free to be your real self, without suspicion?"

"Ah! why?" was the desponding counter-question. "Because such results require steady, disciplined effort and resolution, and I fear my real self rebels against such, as much as against mean imputations."

"But would it not be possible to alter that?" she asked, with the more earnestness as she saw his declined.

"Possible, I suppose," he answered, half gloomily, "but half the world falls short of achieving possibilities. To the sluggard, for instance, nothing seems easier than to promise over-night to conquer sloth and be up with the lark; but when the morning actually comes, there is another side to the question."

"Oh! the pity of it——" cried Althea; stopping short there, lost in reflection. Then, lifting her head again, she went on with even greater eagerness: "If only the sluggard could just make the effort, even for once, and find out what the early morning is to those who win it! But, Mr. Valender, metaphor apart, did I tell you, when we were talking of sacrifices, where much of my mother's tiny fortune went—and how Edmund could never have had the prospects he has, unless

mother had paid for his articles, after putting the question to the family vote? There was but one dissentient voice, and that was Edmund's own. I wish you could see how he is now striving to deserve that sacrifice, and how he keeps steadily in view the hope of being one day able to more than make up to mother and us all, for anything we have foregone."

"You love that brother of yours?" Andrew remarked.

"That is an odd question," she responded. "Say, rather, that I am *proud* of him. Do not all sisters love their brothers?"

"An abstract question that, in all conscience. I thought we were to keep steadily to particulars, and steer clear of generalities. I'm afraid my sister would be rather staggered by the query—in your sense of the word, at least. Brothers don't always count for much, so far as I find. I gave Mildred a new opera-cloak last January, that she had set her mind on, and for a little while there was no one like Andrew; but one can't be always buying opera-cloaks, you know, even to gratify a sister."

Althea's lips parted in the intensity of her surprise, but for a moment no sound came from them. An overwhelming sense of pity and longing came over her to help the man at her side, whose possibilities were so great—whose needs so deep—whose drifting tendencies were so perceptible; for that brief interval, the half-maternal instinct, known to all true womanhood, was as real in its way as the other instinct, that had risen all unawares, under his delight in the old brocade.

For an instant she forgot that she was young, and that her action might be misconstrued; she had almost clasped his hands in hers, but a sudden thought of Daisy checked the movement, and she said softly—

"But you have a mother. If your sister is selfish and worldly, you have a mother; and by-and-by, you know, you will have—a friend. Till then, there is no love like a mother's."

"There are mothers *and* mothers," was the reply, in the

same dejected tone. "It is not for me to disparage mine, or to argue that if I had had such an one as you have pictured, I might have even emulated the ardour of that lad you love so well. Yet, I verily believe I might. However, that is poor work, crying over might-have-beens. My mother was not romantic enough to run away with any one, Miss Holmes. She was not my respected father's first fancy, as you no doubt know; he met her, a woman tinged with society ideas, when he was no longer young, and they began married life together, with a stock in trade of love and affection relatively small to that of common sense,—except, indeed, on the subject of business, where my poor mother's common sense proved to be deficient. I mean to say that, her ideas being altogether above those of my father, the standing of an ordinary city attorney was not to her mind, and she did all she could to keep the office a tabooed subject."

"And your father?"

"Stuck to it all the closer from sheer lack of sympathy, so far as I can gather; but I was only a tiny child when he died. My uncle Valender kept the business together as well as he could till I could take it on; but, I fear, between us we have made rather a hash of it. At least, I know I have disappointed him, and he has devoted himself to his own affairs of late."

"And you had no encouragement at home?" asked Althea. "Did they not, at least, teach you the dignity of self-help and independent exertion?"

"I am afraid my mother's notions of dignity are not connected with the office, Miss Holmes; anyway, she never urged my attendance there, and, I believe, half hoped in her heart I should enter the army, and throw up my father's calling. She knew, besides, of Miss Felicia's views for me, and was quite content I should be often here, though she and Mildred find Elm-leigh life rather flat and tame, and do not get on very well with the old ladies. So, you see, Miss Grace has some

right on her side when she belabours me for a ne'er-do-weel."

He did not say it so lightly, however, as he would have done at another time; and though he smiled, there was something in the smile that seemed to Althea sadder even than tears.

"I am so sorry," was all she could say. But, one after another, ideas began to float through her eager mind as to how Andrew Valender could be helped and influenced. If only he could talk with her mother! if Edmund could only inspire him!

Then the chain of thought was suddenly snapped by the sound of her name, and the sight of the grey eyes seeking hers, with something in them quite different to what they had ever yet revealed.

"You said just now that some day—by-and-by—I should have a friend. That is what I want. Why wait till by-and-by? Why not now—*to-day?*"

It was a singular moment. If it is true that we live in deeds, not years,—in intensity, not in actual duration—Althea lived years in that brief space. If it had been admiration only, such as Andrew Valender's gaze had once revealed, she could have turned from it; if sympathy, such as that of last night, she might have met it fearlessly and fully: but an appeal, a sense of need—oh, it was hard to turn from that, in a glance that had grown so eloquent these last weeks!

Her impulse was to take the offered hand, and yield him willingly and gladly all he asked; and if, with her friendship, she could not help giving him more besides, the secret would be all her own—he need never know.

But that reasoning passed as soon as it came. She knew, if he did not, that he had come too near already to make mere friendship between them safe, or even possible: other women, with cooler heads and steadier hands, might adjust life so perhaps, without harm to themselves or others; her fine moral sense assured her that she could not, and therefore even

friendship, with these secret reserves, would be a wrong to Daisy.

The struggle, though brief, was painfully acute; the temptation was none the less severe because of its being momentary; but, as ever, the character emerged the stronger and nobler for the sacrifice. One single instant Althea thought of the flower message, and what it had taught her—"Be comforted; life is beautiful yet, for those who will have it so,"—and that thought came like the touch of an angel's wing in passing.

It helped her to lift her head now, and to say in a tone, the infinite gentleness of which might have been borrowed likewise from unseen messengers—

"*Make* the effort we were speaking of. Oh, only *try* to make life worth living, and you will not need to ask for friends!"

She had begun radiantly, with such a wonderful light in her clear eyes as only Heaven could have kindled there—a beauty altogether higher than that he had seen awake under his artist touch that strange morning; but now, as the last words ended almost inaudibly, he caught a momentary glimpse of tears, before she turned and sped swiftly away under the elms.

She had thought herself stronger than she was; when her voice broke down, there was only one thing to do, and she had already reached the shrubbery door when her rapid flight was stayed.

"Althea! *Althea!*"

Only those two words, but with firm, detaining hands upon her shoulders, with eloquent eyes looking deep, deep down into her own, with a whole volume compressed into the tender tone. Ah! there was no putting aside the meaning of all that!

She covered her face for an instant, pressing her hands hard over her eyes to shut out the sight; and the words came with a little cry of pain—

"Ah! Mr. Valender, be merciful! Do not tempt me! Think of Daisy!"

The start with which he released her at least equalled the astonishment of his reply.

"Of Daisy? Of my friend Conway's sister? Of Mildred's friend, and my little champion? In the name of wonder, what of *her*, other than that?"

"Can it be possible that is all?" asked Althea, incredulously. "Could everybody be deceived? Aunt Felicia, and Louise, and Mrs. Blakeney—ah! and even—— Oh, it is such a pitiful mistake for Daisy!"

But the sense of the last remark seemed to have escaped her companion. For the moment, at least, he was too much taken up with his own provocations to have room to think of Daisy's difficulties; and the slight laugh with which he began to recover from his amazement was far from mirthful.

"People are much too kind to me," he began. "Not content with weighing my money-bags for me, and giving them out to public gossip as about treble their actual value—not satisfied with appraising me as a petted puppy, who is wise, too, in his generation, they must even choose my wife for me, and settle me down to their own satisfaction!"

A soft touch of Althea's hand upon his arm checked the bitter mood at once, and brought his eyes back to her face.

"I would think rather," she remarked gently, "how much harder it is for Daisy. When a mistake like this takes place, it is always worse for the woman."

Andrew shook his head in a way that implied room for doubt on that score.

"Was it Daisy you meant just now, when you promised me that particular friend one day?"

"Who else should it be?" she answered.

"And Daisy was in your thoughts when you refused my friendship?"

"I did not see how to do anything else—*then*," murmured Althea.

Some hesitation in the last word, a sudden rose-colour in the

shy face, the downward droop of her eyes, on whose lashes the recent tears still lingered—all this, with the sweet breath of the roses in her breast, made ample amends for past mistakes, and rendered the next few moments a summer idyll.

For that all too brief time, past and future alike slipped out of sight; no thought of poor prospects or anything else could rob them of the strange joy of the rich present. To one of them, at least, it seemed as if her whole life hitherto had been a mere leading up to the wonder and gladness of this moment, and she could almost believe that the sun in heaven stood still in his course to give them time to breathe.

That was the woman's idea, of course: the man could not so completely lose his hold on realities. Besides, he had studied law, however fitfully, and perhaps his legal education had taught him the value and importance of practical speech, even though it might seem unnecessary.

"Althea," he said, after what seemed a very long time, though it was less than five minutes, "I used the word *friend* just now because you did; but we will not fence with the subject any more. Daisy Conway has long been my friend—will, I hope, ever continue to be; but the kind of friend I asked for, and that I thought you understood, is of a different nature. Let me go on and make a clean breast of it, and tell you that ever since that night we first met, you have attracted me, and I have resisted the attraction the more it grew. Yes, open those brown eyes of yours if you will, but it is true. I did not want to be in a hurry. I wanted to be free for many years to come yet. In any case, it will have to be years before I can make such a home as I wish for the wife of my choice, and so I fought against the idea over and over again; but now, you see, I am vanquished. How you have conquered me I hardly know, but it is a literal fact; henceforth I lay down my arms."

Not quite the sort of wooing this, that Edmund and she had dreamed of by the riverside, over the old poems! Had it not been for what she had seen just now in her companion's eyes,

heard in the peculiar tone of her twice-repeated name, Althea would have resented such words as these; and even as it was she rebelled a little.

"However I may have conquered," she said, with a flash of her old spirit, "I will have no unwilling captives in my train. The freedom you were so loth to lose may be sweet again some day or other; when that comes, you have only to say one word."

"Ungenerous girl," he said, with a smile of rare sweetness, as he took both her hands in his own, the better to look into her face. "When I tried to clear my conscience of all guilt by open and candid avowal, you flout my confession, and almost turn your back on me. We must have no quarrels in our future home, I can see; for those eyes of yours can show sparks of fire, now and then, that augur danger."

The fire was quenched in a sudden mist at this point, as she murmured, as if in spite of herself—

"Ah! if you only *knew!* Some day I can tell you, perhaps, but not to-day; it is too new and strange. But if I looked hurt just now, it was not anger; it was—— Oh! do understand, without my saying! It is so hard just yet to put these things into words."

"I shall have to learn to interpret a good deal without words, or rather with only broken sentences, it strikes me, Althie! Well for me that my particular 'ooseberry picker has an eloquent face, whose language I have begun to master without a dictionary. But it is a long time to look forward to before we can make our start in life. Even if I survive the ordeal with those two fearful Haringtonians, and win consent from your parents besides, to make you my lawful property, I wonder if you will think me worth waiting for, when it comes to the point?"

"I wonder too, very much," replied Althea, demurely. "And you, too—the same question will arise for you, as time wears on; especially as there is not the faintest shadow of a money-bag

in my case. And then—another and worse ordeal lies before *me*, with regard to your mother and sister, and your uncle Valender: to say nothing of Aunt Felicia and Aunt Grace. Oh! you have not thought of half the obstacles and ordeals yet, Mr. Valender!"

"You are laughing at me! If we choose to look out for squalls, no doubt there are plenty to be predicted. But as for my mother and sister, I think my choice will have to be theirs; and as for other people—well, I am not the sort of man, Althea, to go down on my knees to my fellow-creatures, physically or mentally."

"Indeed you are not," was her inward reflection; but the distant sound of carriage wheels struck on her ear, and brought her heart into her mouth with sudden dread.

Like two guilty children they stood and looked at each other, conscious that difficulty and possible unpleasantness were close at hand.

"We are not Adam and Eve," said Andrew, then. "And unfortunately there are a few other people in the world. I think we will keep them in the dark, about our affairs, yet awhile."

"Oh no, *no!*" was the firm rejoinder, as Althea began to lose sight of her late unexpected bliss in the thought of the pain awaiting another. "For Daisy's sake we must have no mysteries; however hard it will be to tell them, it must be done, and done at once. Go to her, or to Aunt Felicia, at least (it will be all the same), and get it over; and I will stay here a few minutes, and then join you in the house."

There was no time to lose indeed, and so, however reluctantly, Andrew obeyed. Voices were even now audible in the garden, and he had to quit the shrubbery with less of his accustomed coolness, to avoid a *rencontre* with Miss Grace, the tap of whose cane was heard on the neighbouring walk.

Althea had fled like a bird at the sound, to the partial

seclusion of the acacia bower; but there was no help for it, so Miss Grace's call for her grenadier met with an immediate response.

Not much like a grenadier's, however—that deprecating face, with its rapidly-changing colour, that appeared in the vine-clad entrance. Miss Grace eyed it sharply and suspiciously; then broke out—

"Here's a pretty state of things! So that's the meaning of Master Andrew's hurry to escape me just now, and well might he be ashamed! When number One was away, number Two would do for a little flirtation, I suppose; and you were goose enough to listen to him! I thought better of you, Althea."

"Aunt Grace, stay please. Oh! do stay one minute and help me! Don't think so hardly of either of us—indeed, you have no cause. It was not flirtation. Mr. Valender has asked me—some day, you know, when he can afford it—to be his wife."

"Then I am a great deal more sorry than I was before," was Miss Grace's only comment.

Althea's face fell suddenly.

"I know it is far more than I could ever have expected," she began, humbly, "and everything is most uncertain even now. His family may not desire it, and Aunt Felicia and you had far different views for him, I know; and yet——"

"There you are!" exclaimed the old lady, "making the very worst of yourself, as usual! I don't know that the pity is all to be wasted on one side, like that; it might be, I was thinking the other way. But that is nothing to the point, and young people who make mistakes must pull themselves through them as best they can—it is their own affair. Still, I am sorry. Andrew Valender should enter a family of some influence and position, who could put good things in his way, if he is to do anything in the world; and choose a wife who had the proper thickness of skin to take his queer ways as coolly as they are

shown. While *you*—you silly goosie, will be breaking your heart at the first indifferent word. Yes—I cannot help it—I am sorry. It will be sure to come to no good. There, go along, and make your peace with Felicia as soon as possible!"

CHAPTER XI.

A CULPRIT.

"Surely a woman's affection
Is not a thing to be asked for, and had for only the asking.
When one is truly in love, one not only says it, but shows it."
Courtship of Miles Standish.

ALTHEA had not over-rated difficulty, and so she found to her cost by the time she reached the house; for Miss Wynton's cold, displeased face was sufficient assurance of that. She was going to her room when Althea returned; Daisy had already gone: and as for Mr. Valender, he had vanished altogether, so the culprit had to meet her ordeal unaided.

It was a chilly, dreadful dinner. Althea was ignored altogether, and all her efforts at conversation fell to the ground; at last she gave up the attempt and relapsed into pained silence. Daisy talked incessantly—eagerly, as if she were afraid of one moment's silence; and two bright spots of colour in her cheeks betrayed her disquietude, while Miss Felicia's manner towards her was more than usually gentle and sympathetic. No sooner was dinner over than Daisy pleaded over-exertion at tennis as an excuse for her unusual fatigue; she kissed the sisters just as usual, and quietly held up her face for Althea's good night, as if nothing had come between them since they parted a few hours ago. As for Althea, such gentleness unnerved her far more than her aunt's sternness, and her lips would fain have clung to that uplifted face; but it would

not do—there was no answering embrace, and the kiss was evidently only part of the programme Daisy had set herself to carry through without blenching.

Miss Wynton's gaze followed her as if she had indeed been the wronged woman she fancied her, and her face was even harder than her voice as she turned to her niece, saying pointedly—

"I hope you are satisfied *now*, Althea Holmes."

"Aunt Felicia," cried the girl, deprecatingly, "surely you know—surely Mr. Valender has told you——"

But Miss Wynton cut her short.

"Do not talk to me of Mr. Valender," she said, with even more bitterness. "I little imagined, when I invited you here, that you were to thwart cherished wishes, and render others unhappy as well as myself, and end by coming between Mr. Valender and one who loves him as I have done. I dare say you feel elated to-night, but underhand dealing never answers in the long run. It will come to no good."

A momentary chill struck through the listener's frame at these ominous words, heard thus for the second time since the joy of the afternoon. But her aunt's words had revealed where the chief sting lay; it was evident Andrew had been betrayed, under momentary provocation, into saying something hard and bitter, and Althea could, even at such a time, afford to be generous with the thought of the old lady's wounded feelings.

"I am not elated, Aunt Felicia," she answered, gently, "and I can understand your being taken by surprise. How could it be otherwise, indeed, when I have hardly recovered from it myself? For I assure you no one could be more surprised than I at the issue of this afternoon."

Miss Wynton's hard grey eye had something almost vindictive in it for a moment, as she gazed sternly at her niece.

"Althea," she began in slow measured tones, "you are related to me by ties of blood, but there are certain elements in you which, I rejoice to say, you do not get from the

Wyntons. Whatever their faults, they had at least too much self-respect to place themselves deliberately in the way of matrimonial offers in the unseemly way you have done. And perhaps when proposals *did* come to them—as it may surprise you to hear that they did, even to those who did not go out of their place to seek them,—perhaps, I say, they were esteemed none the less for being less eager to seize the first opportunity. A woman should be sought—not seek; when she forgets this, she places it in the power of her future husband to remind her of it afterwards."

Althea's face was growing red and white by turns during this unexpected homily, and something of the choking sensation she had felt in the little wood, under Andrew's strictures, was taking possession of her; she turned instinctively to Miss Grace, in the first shock of the surprise, but the younger sister's face was inscrutable, and she kept her head deliberately bent over some netting she had taken up on first entering the room.

So, with that odd trembling in her voice, but with a determined effort to avoid passion of any sort, Althea replied—

"Aunt Felicia, your remarks only show how little you know me, to imagine them necessary. Who should understand me better than my own mother? And if she should ever have cause to say the tenth part of what you have said to-night——"

The pathetic voice broke down at this point, in spite of all resolution to the contrary; but Miss Wynton went on, unmoved—

"If I am so mistaken in you—if you were, as you say, so surprised at this afternoon's events, how comes it that, a whole fortnight ago, you and Mr. Valender were strolling in the garden and shrubbery together, long after we were all gone upstairs for the night? Yes, you may well look surprised! I should never have known anything of it from yourself, or from others, probably, but for to-day's doings; now, however, Phelps has admitted her uneasiness at seeing you and your new friend

contriving your stealthy flight upstairs, and his waiting under the trees till you were safely within. All this may seem very natural and fitting according to *your* standard; I confess that to mine it is very far from becoming, much less upright and honourable. But however widely our opinions may differ on that point, there can be no question about your prevarication, when you attempt to urge *surprise* as your excuse."

Alas, Althea! If it was difficult to explain the cause of innocent rambles to Mr. Valender, it would be ten times harder to justify them to Miss Wynton. One more appealing glance shot from the brown eyes towards Miss Grace's corner, but it was evident no help was forthcoming thence; Phelps's account had been too much for both sisters in their present humour. Back again came her glance to Miss Wynton's stern countenance, and then Althea gave it up altogether as hopeless.

"You are very angry with me," she said, in a tired voice, "and that makes you harder than you would otherwise be. But you will be very sorry, too, when you find how you have misjudged me. I cannot explain anything for myself; it is too difficult—to-night at least. May I say good night, now, and go to bed?"

Both sisters made a formal inclination from where they sat, so Althea did not attempt to approach them, though her heart seemed bursting. At the door she turned an instant, and faltered—

"Aunt Felicia, I told them to expect me home in two days, but perhaps you would rather, now, that I left to-morrow? Shall I make fresh arrangements?"

"You will be good enough to keep to your first proposal," was all the reply the old lady vouchsafed; and Althea, who still lingered, was on the point of crying, "But I could not stay where I am no longer welcome," when Miss Wynton took up her book, as if to put an end to any further discussion.

It may be imagined that the charge of undue elation was almost as groundless as any of the rest, for poor Althea shut

herself into her room that night with perhaps quite as forlorn a heart as Daisy's own.

At any rate, from whatever pain and mortification Daisy was suffering, she knew that passionate weeping, how great-soever the present relief, has after-effects of a terrible nature —to one, at least, in her present position. She was not prepared to play the love-sick maiden under Andrew's very eyes, and to be thought a victim to his fascinations; so, with that wise forethought that never forsook her, even at the worst, Miss Conway carried her sad little heart to bed, foregoing even the luxury of a good cry.

As for the other girl, we have seen enough of her to know that she had not acquired the faculty of being wise in her generation. The varied experiences of this long day, the conflicting emotions through which she had passed since her lengthy ramble in the morning, would have made sleep a necessity at any other time, but Althea had no thought of rest to-night. Once safe in her room, the flood-gates of wounded feeling opened, past any further repression. The great sobs that shook her from head to foot had more than one cause, it is true; but, at first, everything else seemed to fade away before the stern accusatory gaze from which she had just fled.

To a nature like hers, even a look was sufficient to wound or heal, according as it was prompted by love or its opposite; mere anger would have been enough to subdue her at once, apart from such an accusation as that from which she was suffering now: but Althea was touched to-night in her very tenderest point, and for a long while she seemed unable even to think. Miss Wynton might well say they must wish plain sailing for such a life as hers. Prompted by affection, indeed, Althea was the sort of woman to go through fire and water without blenching; but cruelty or coldness quenched her spirit utterly, and deprived her of the least power of self-defence.

So she lay a long weary while in the low chair upon which she had flung herself, with her face pressed into the pillows of

her bed, to stifle the sobs that could not be kept down longer; and then as, relieved and exhausted, she grew calmer, the tears rained on yet awhile, for she was too unhappy to think of reddened eyes just then.

Even when her thoughts went back to the joy of the afternoon, the relief was but momentary. The bliss of having Andrew Valender's love all her own, had seemed scarcely a tangible possession until others shared the knowledge; it needed, somehow, confirmation: and lo! instead of that, it had met with just the reverse. Even in the first moment of her seeking sympathy, Miss Grace's words had chilled and grieved her; now, after the hard language she had just heard, they took a meaning that seemed to Althea's despondent mood altogether prophetic. "It will come to no good," both her aunts had said, though with widely different feelings; in the darkness of the night, Althea could almost re-echo the words as a sad refrain, for she began to believe in them even herself.

What good *could* come, indeed? Had a lover ever admitted before that he had come, as it were, against his will, to give in his allegiance? "She had conquered him," had been Mr. Valender's plea, and even in the sunlight it had sounded strange; but now, in the night watches, it seemed, to her tortured fancy, not unlike those other dreadful words of Miss Felicia's, about being "eager to seize the first opportunity." Oh, how horrible it was! Would it be possible for a time to come when Andrew might remind *her* that a woman's place is not to seek?

The thought almost maddened her, in spite of her innocence. She could not lie prone like that any longer, and, springing up, she began to pace the room softly and deliberately, the better to aid reflection; before long the sun would be up, and with the new day something definite must be arrived at.

She knew she had not deserved one of those imputations—that upon no single occasion had she ever sought Andrew

Valender; it was not conscience that accused. Yet, in a strange, exhausted, melancholy way, her judgment seemed to be over-balanced; Miss Felicia's tirade, Daisy's grief, and the maid's betrayal, coupled with Andrew's singular wooing, all conspired to render poor Althea almost helpless in separating her own identity from that of the misguided character others believed her. True enough, this *was* her first opportunity, as they had said; no lover had ever crossed her path heretofore, and now, directly she had known he was free, she had betrayed herself all too palpably. But then, did not *Love* count for anything?

Althea knew that she loved this man, in spite of every defect; that she would cheerfully wait whole years till he could prepare a home for her, such as he intended; that she could even bear up against the disapproval of his more ambitious relatives, if it were necessary. It was something apart from all this that made her pause.

He had fought against the attraction himself; he had wished to be free yet awhile, but a moment of emotion had betrayed him into a confession: who knows but even already he was cursing his folly in being so precipitate? There had been no pleading on his part, Althea could remember, now—no passionate urging, such as she imagined lovers used: was it that lovers were more matter-of-fact than in Shakespeare's days? or was it—oh! was it—that he had had no cause to woo, since she had been so lightly won?

The room seemed to contract, suddenly, to half its size. Althea felt cramped and suffocated, as if in a poisoned atmosphere; and with a swift movement she set her window wide, to drink in the breath of the dawn.

Did it come literally from Heaven as it brought its old strength with it, and the power to act and to resolve, that had seemed paralyzed before?

Anyway, her first resolve with the new day was, that Andrew should be free again; that he should have back what he had

only given in spite of himself; that, until he knew his own mind better, he should be at liberty to seek Daisy, or whom he would.

The very fact of a decision, however painful, brought some relief, and, wearied out at last, Althea sought her pillow, and passed almost instantly into forgetfulness; her last conscious idea being that there were yet some blessed hours of rest and oblivion before her, ere she would have to meet the daylight face to face, and the pain and trouble it was surely bringing her.

CHAPTER XII.

VIVA VOCE.

"To keep your heart unbroken,
Hold it in your hand."

ADELAIDE PROCTOR.

"WILL he come to-day?"

Althea found herself secretly asking this question many times as the slow hours wore on, for never had any day of her life passed on such leaden wings. There seemed nothing to be done, and nobody to want her, for the same averted looks met her everywhere, except indeed from Daisy; and Miss Conway, always polite to everybody, was not wanting even now, but Althea could plainly see that it was not love, but a sense of self-respect that kept Daisy's tones gentle, and her manner free from restraint.

So the day wore on heavily enough, and when Daisy appeared towards five o'clock equipped for a walk, and with a somewhat ostentatious carelessness, professed her intention of going to see Mrs. Stanway, as her visit would so soon expire, no one failed to recognize the motive she would fain have concealed—the dread of meeting Andrew Valender if he should be coming: and Miss Felicia did not attempt to interfere with her arrangements.

So, as Daisy stood leisurely buttoning her gloves, and advising Miss Wynton not to wait for her if she should be long in returning, looking so dainty all the while, in her cool dress,

Althea sat silent and forlorn a few paces away, with her head dull and aching from last night's excitement, and her heart, that had been dull even to stupor hitherto, now beginning to flutter with a nervousness that was almost pain.

Would Mr. Valender come?

If he did not, she would know he was regretting the rashness of yesterday: if he did—well, that meant an ordeal for her, that seemed altogether beyond her strength. She could not meet him here, under the eyes of her offended relatives; and, visitors just then arriving, she lost no time in slipping away.

Up and down, up and down, under the elms, she slowly paced, trying in a tired sort of way to keep her ideas clear for the arguments she might have to use, in case Andrew should be really more desirous to hold to his engagement than she imagined him to be; and yet, even as she steeled her heart and made firmer resolves, the sweetness of yesterday was encompassing her like a delicious dream. Could it indeed be only yesterday, and not months ago? for already this half-realized possession seemed to have slipped a long way from her grasp.

"Time and tide wait for no man," cried a cheery voice, breaking in upon the mournful reverie at this point; and the sound came like a healthful breath of ocean to Althea. She had often wondered that day, how she and Mr. Valender would meet next time, but for a moment she forgot all else, now that he was come.

"I have been watching you for at least five minutes," he said, "but you were so lost in meditation, I had to give in and make myself visible. People that hold railway season tickets are uncomfortably reminded of that proverb now and then, and I felt my time was running out. How is the world going with you to-day, Althea?"

"Did they tell you I was out here?" she asked quickly, passing by his question without regarding it.

"Not the Wyntons, if you mean them. The drawing-room

was full of people, so I kept clear of that, and thought a bit of 'sensible, rational, enjoyable talk' would be more to my mind. (Have I got it right, I wonder?) Instinct told me I should find some one here who would be able to indulge my peculiar taste; which shall it be to-day, Althea? Sensible and rational, or only enjoyable, without the other two? You shall choose, you know."

Althea's heart beat very fast, and her pale cheek flushed, as she said, half turning aside—

"I want to ask you something, very much, Mr. Valender. I have been thinking a great deal about—about yesterday, and I feel sure we were in too great a hurry over things. Everybody thinks so, and now I am afraid I do myself. So I have been thinking we will go back, please, to——"

"To the arbour? Just what I was thinking too, Althea." And smiling gravely at her deprecating look, he led her to the little rustic seat, and drew her down beside him, keeping his arm lightly round her all the while.

"If you please, Mr. Valender, I think I could talk better if you——"

"If I withdrew my arm? What an 'ooseberry picker it is, to be sure! No, dear, I don't think you could—believe me. Those pale cheeks and heavy eyelids tell a different story—they tell me that you are not so independent as you would make out. Now, I am waiting to know why you think we have hurried into things, and who 'everybody' is that is so convincing."

Althea's ear was acutely sensitive to the tones of particular voices. They affected her more than the mere words to which they gave expression. Possibly the susceptibility to musical sounds that characterized her father, appeared in this form in his child, for her musical instincts were awakened by the human, everyday voices around her, more than by any instrument that was ever made. And now, though there had been no embrace between Mr. Valender and herself to-day, she

felt he read her through and through; and the buoyant tone with which he had first met her, had changed into one of peculiar protecting tenderness, every word of which sounded like a caress. Coming as it did, after the loneliness and bitterness of the past few hours, she felt her new-born resolution fast melting away into a delicious sense of rest, as she allowed her head to droop a little against the protecting arm. It was easier to speak so, with her face shaded, for, now it had come to the point, she was painfully conscious that her eyes were very red and heavy, and that her answer would be more easily made away from observation.

It did not take her companion very long to glean that she had been grieved, beyond measure, at most unjust accusations. For though Althea did not reveal half of what Miss Wynton had said, he gathered enough to know that her punishment had been severe; and when Phelps's part in the transaction came out, his brow darkened so ominously, that it was well Althea's face was averted, or she would have been alarmed.

"Poor little woman," he murmured at length. "She seems to have the hard fate of getting into scrapes with all the world, from Lord Beaconsfield down to a lady's-maid. What a brute you must have thought me, to run away and leave you at such a moment! But it was not so, Althie, indeed. Miss Felicia and I had rather a sharp passage of arms, after I saw you yesterday, and I went off in a huff; but I never thought *you* would be called upon to bear the brunt of what I had done."

"No. It was a mistake—a mistake all round—everyway. Even between our two selves. Mr. Valender," said Althea, raising her head determinately, and moving a little aside, "whatever you said to me yesterday, I am resolved to forget, as though it had never been, and then—you will be quite free; because I am convinced it was all done hurriedly, and that you will regret it by-and-by, when it would be more difficult to retract. I want you to enjoy your freedom for years to come yet awhile."

She had been struggling on as fast as she could, without looking at him, until she reached this point, and then the forlorn little smile and the quaver in the voice were a poor attempt at the spirit of yesterday, and Mr. Valender was not likely to be deceived.

"Where are all your roses, Althie?" he asked, with a provoking disregard of all she had been striving to say; but with the little touch of tenderness that kept the remark from sounding like indifference.

"I forgot to gather any to-day," she replied; "I was thinking of something else."

"I think you were," was the rejoinder, with a smile at the literalness of her reply. "Yesterday you were running over with roses—cheeks and lips and dress; and to-day—— Ah, well, never mind. Was it thinking so much about this longed-for freedom of mine, that kept you awake half the night?"

She could not answer just then, and her companion went on—

"Shall I tell you what I have been doing to-day? Not crying, Althie, nor lying awake very long. If that is what Harington people do—get into scrapes by day, and bemoan them by night—it must make life a veritable vale of tears. Guess now, what time I was up this morning."

"I dare not," she answered, trying hard to keep her lips from trembling, for she knew well what this affected lightness meant.

"You could not, say rather! Six o'clock, in all sincerity! Up at six, and writing hard for some hours before breakfast; two particular letters first, and then all sorts of neglected despatches, winding up with a list of business calls to be made, later on in the day. I declare, by the time I turned into the office, I felt like the little old woman who was so doubtful of her own identity that she cried, 'If it be I, as I suppose it be.' Now tell me which of us behaved the most sensibly, so far, young lady."

"I'm afraid I am not a woman of sense," was the low answer.

"And yet so addicted to rational discourse? Well, extremes do meet, we all know. But if you could have seen the exemplary young man, all day in the office, Althea, keeping a hawk's eye on any chance bit of business that might drift his way! And since four o'clock he has made such a circuit as would satisfy even you, and had a chance of redeeming some of his engagements, and of finding more opportunities for the future, thanks to the elder Valender's credit. Oh, you'll see what he can do, after a time!"

Althea's hand nestled a little closer in the warm clasp that had kept her own all this time; and she said, still more faintly than before—

"But about another engagement, Mr. Valender? You will not answer me, and it is so necessary to understand. Let us be quite serious a moment, while I tell you again that we must not bind ourselves yet awhile. Let us go on our separate ways, for, say, six months or a year, until we are sure we know our own minds; and then, if absence make no difference, and we can bear the test, we shall be all the happier for being sure."

"What an admirable discourse!" cried Andrew. "Really, I could almost fancy I had asked Mrs. Hannah More to cast in her lot with me, for that reply sounds like a moral treatise for young people, on the Conduct of the Affections. And all the while, Althie, I can see that the terribly sensible advice is only on the surface, and that down below is the real, living, loving self you are doing your best to hide from me. Quite too late, dear, everyway. As well try to persuade me that the madcap girl I saw at full gallop on the rocking-horse is a tame, drawing-room young lady! Besides, you don't ask about those two particular letters."

"Tell me," was the low reply.

"One was to my uncle, telling him that—well, that I had engaged myself to be married, and meant to settle down into

a Benedict as soon as practicable. That was a little crafty of me, by the way; for I am sure to get business thrown in my direction, if my uncle really sees me in earnest about it. The other was to my mother, with the news that I had met a niece of Miss Wynton's who had promised to be my wife, if I gained her parents' consent."

"Andrew! so soon, and so coolly too!" cried the girl, forgetting, till the word was out, how new the name was upon her lips, and then turning to hide her confusion by creeping nearer to him.

She hardly knew, at first, whether to be more alarmed or rejoiced at the decided course events were taking; and, in the momentary pause, Andrew half whispered as he drew her close—

"I am only obeying orders, dear. You said we had no right to keep it to ourselves, and I have literally obeyed. You did not like it yesterday when I said I had laid down my arms; but, in a sense, it is true. I feel like a rebel who has been vanquished so completely, that rebellion will henceforth lose its charm. In a more literal sense than some women, Althie, you have made a conquest; but it is the conquest of love."

The last word was almost inaudible. It seemed so new and strange on the lips of this man, easy and cool as he was in ordinary affairs, that his pale cheek flushed like a girl's, even at saying so much to the woman of his choice. She saw it, and understood the reticence; but for the moment it reversed their mutual position, and armed the usually timid, sensitive girl with the outspoken courage that her companion seemed to lack.

Disengaging herself gently from his detaining hold, she sprang to her feet, and stood before him, with changing colour indeed, but perfectly resolute; for it seemed to her the happiness of a whole lifetime might be at stake just then.

"Mr. Valender," she began, "we will not spoil our whole lives for the want of a plain word. It is hard to say it, but

I have done things harder yet. You tell me I am trying to hide my real self from you. See, then, I do it no more. The real self is—is what you have seen, and oh, much, much more! I do love you; and, when I say that, it means that there is nothing I would not do for your sake. But, don't you see—oh, do *try* to see!—that, just because I love you, it would be so much better to break with it all, now, while it is new, than to have to do so later on, because of any mistake. I am sure of myself; but—oh, don't be angry!—I *cannot* be quite sure of you."

He had risen as she spoke, and had stood looking down upon her as she struggled through; and the last appealing words sent a strange thrill through him, and made his lips tremble.

"Althea," he replied, "your frankness deserves a frank return, and you shall have it. Weeks ago I told you I respected you; to-night I respect you for that brave word of yours more than ever before. You know that I love you; what can I add to that? I am not the man to pay flowery compliments to the woman I wish to win. You certainly are not the one to desire it; and yet, what *is* it your eyes are asking so intently all the while? You showed me your heart, and I will show you mine—I will be as frank as you. If I cannot play the passionate pilgrim, and weep floods of tears at your feet, does it follow that my love is the less trustworthy? A man can only give what is in him; and if passion is not an element of mine, seeing, as I told you, that I come of calm and unromantic parentage, who knows but it will wear the better in the long run? Come, Mrs. Hannah More," he added, with one of those sudden changes of manner that she was beginning to recognize as a cloak for deeper feelings, "that last sentence was rational enough, even for you! Suppose you embalm it in your next treatise for the guidance of youth."

He drew her to him as he spoke, and touched her forehead with his lips.

"Such a little bundle of contradictions as it is," he murmured fondly, "was surely never moulded into one being before! Child enough to play the madcap; woman enough to go through fire and water for those who love her; and yet philosopher enough to hold her treasure at a distance, till she is convinced of its genuineness. Well, is this one of the things that will bear the daylight?"

"Oh, Andrew," she cried, as, hardly conscious of what she did, she held his two hands in a close pressure, "that is just what I long to know! Mine will, I feel—I know. If you feel the same assurance, everything will come right in time, even in spite of Aunt Grace's predictions."

"What! has Aunt Grace been weeping over us, too?" he asked quickly.

"Oh, it was only that you should have entered an influential family, who could push you on in life, and so on; she was not unkind. But, nothing of that can harm us if real, true love is between us! We *do* love each other, do we not, Andrew?"

"My dear Althie, I begin to believe you are a rationalist, after all, and will accept no proposition without its accompanying proof. Terrible times are these, when even a man's courtship must pass through the same sifting as the arts and sciences, before he can be duly qualified. And, unfortunately, as it is not, strictly speaking, an art or a science, an examination is at once more simple and more complex. Never mind: *vivâ voce* to-day; papers another time. Now, Dr. Althea Holmes, will you proceed to conduct the exam.?"

"You silly boy!" was the laughing, blushing reply, though the brown eyes glistened a little too.

"What an unprofessor-like beginning! We must summon an imaginary inquisitor to meet the exigencies of the moment. 'Now then, Andrew Wynne Valender, do you love the woman called Althea Holmes?' Verily, that do I. 'Have you ever

loved before?' Never, upon the honour of a gentleman. 'Do you intend, in such time as shall seem fit, to make her one with you, in the honourable estate of matrimony?' That is entirely my intention. 'Give an instance, as proof of the genuineness of your affection.' (Student pauses, for the first time, you see, not from ignorance of the science on hand, but from its difficulty of demonstration.")

Althea came to the rescue, with one of her swift glances.

"Would the student do something hard and disagreeable to himself, if it were ever necessary, for the sake of the woman before-mentioned?" she asked, half laughing, but with suppressed excitement in her voice.

He hesitated a moment, and then said, bringing his hand forcibly down upon the rustic table of the alcove—

"Not knowing the future, he cannot say with decision; but he honestly *hopes and believes that he would.* There," he added, shaking back his hair in his old fashion; "is the strain over? Has he passed?"

"He has passed with honours!" was the enthusiastic answer, as Althea suddenly clasped his hand and let the joyful tears fall an instant, unrestrained.

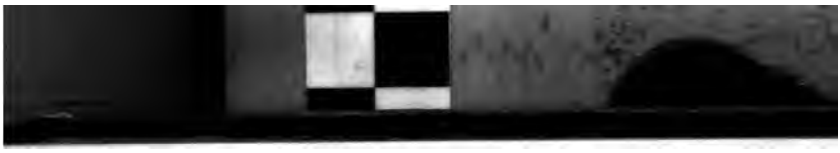
Only an instant, however; her head was lifted again to say, as she gently put from her the caressing arms—

"And now, my B.A.—or whatever his new degree may have made him—will go to Aunt Felicia, and make up his quarrel by asking pardon without loss of time."

"Asking pardon!" he exclaimed, "when she was the greater offender of the two? When she has behaved so abominably to you, besides! That is not my way, Althie."

"But I thought it was to be *my* way now?" was the quick reply. "Oh, Andrew, you will not refuse to do this first disagreeable thing for my sake! Will you not try to make my path smoother up there, as well as your own?"

There was a moment's hesitation, and then he looked up with a slight laugh.



"'If it be I, as I suppose it be;' I shall assuredly be singing that tune pretty often, till I get used to my position. But the idea of your turning me into a second Uriah Heep!"

"Nothing of the sort," she answered. "You need have no fear of ever eating humble-pie to that extent; but an old lady has her claims. You were impetuous; and, because she loves you, you should make all amends."

"So be it then; but I begin to think my own mother won't know me when she returns."

But Althea waved him off, for she was in nervous fear of the warning bell; so Andrew arrived at the house just in time to see the last visitors out at the gate, and to stand chatting with them in easy, negligent consciousness that Miss Wynton's eyes were upon him the whole time.

It was no Uriah Heep that followed his old friend back to the drawing-room, and held out a frank hand as he closed the door upon them.

"Dear Cousin Felicitas," he said, "I am tired of sulking, and so, I am sure, are you. Let bygones be bygones between you and me. Come, take my hand."

She could not resist him, though she tried to do so. After an instant's hesitation she took the proffered hand, and Andrew, still retaining hers, led her to her special chair, and took a stool at her feet, the better to tell his tale about Althea; and that same story lasted long.

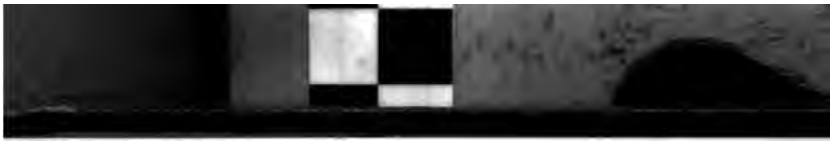
It considerably modified Miss Wynton's impressions of her niece. Indeed Andrew would not release her hand till he had extracted a promise of something more than pardon for the girl he loved, though Miss Felicia maintained to the last she was thoroughly disappointed, and her boy would find he had been too hasty. Her boy, as may be supposed, received this advice as such is usually taken, but forbore comment—only hung a moment over his old friend's chair, and kissed her cheek.

"How you women love!" he said then. "It makes

me ask myself what have I ever done to deserve so much."

"And yet you were ready to forget all my affection yesterday, on the first breath of the new," she replied, with a tender shade of reproach.

"I was a lion then, for the moment," was the answer; "but, between you, you have made a lamb of me to-day. Pull together, dear old friend, and who knows but I may turn out half an angel yet?"



CHAPTER XIII.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

"E'en human Love will shrink from sight,
Here in the coarse rude earth:
* * * *
Then why should gentle hearts and true,
Bare to the rude world's withering view
Their treasure of delight?"

KEBLE.

STEAMING homewards, mile after mile, hour after hour, past the sunlit meadows with their sleepy kine, and the broad reaches of the placid Thames, sat Althea, that warm July afternoon, lost in day-dreams. The *Standard* and one of the latest periodicals still lay unopened on the cushion beside her, just where Andrew Valender had placed them at the last moment, as he said farewell; but just then she had no desire to study either. The book of her life lay open, that for the time being presented more attractive reading. A definite leaf in it had just been turned, and before beginning afresh on the old Harington pages, Althea was glad of these sunny, sleepy hours, to let her fancy roam at its own will over things past and future.

Over Elm-leigh life, and those she had left behind, for one thing. Pleasant enough memories these, taking them all in all. For Miss Wynton had taken back the greater part of her hard judgments and suspicions, and, though she was not so cordial as before, she and her niece had at least parted friends;

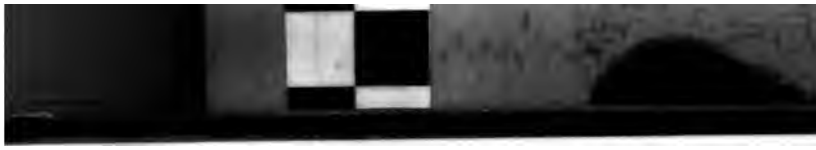
while Miss Grace had openly lamented Althea's departure, and confessed she should be quite lost without her companion to make the round of the flower-beds in the long evenings.

Yes! Althea could not help sighing as she turned down the Elm-leigh leaf. It might not be the place in which to make the best of life; it might be too smooth and easy to develop muscle, physical or mental; it might be that it lacked the earnestness of home, both in its loving and its difficulties: still, there are times when musk and rose-leaves are sweet, even if their breath beget languor, and it seemed to the dreaming girl that those old china bowls in the hall, with their faint, subtle odour of past summers, were somehow typical of the whole life in the midst of which she had been.

Old trees, old rooms, old inhabitants, old memories; and akin to those dried leaves were sweet old recollections of departed loves, the fragrance of which still survived at times like these. Althea wondered if her Aunt Felicia ever caught a passing fragrance of her own early youth, with its one romance; or of those later blossoms in the lives of her young sisters, Eva and Althea. And now there would be more rose-leaves, embalming fresh memories for the next generation, of the life stories of Louise and herself.

Yet stay. Rose-leaves? For Louise perchance; but it seemed to Althea, nothing so soft and delicate awaited herself, unless, indeed, the "pot-pourri" fragrance only came when love and life had been embalmed by the memories of a score of years.

For the rapturous joy with which she had, in a moment of conviction, abandoned herself without reserve to her lover's persuasions, had not kept at "set fair" for very long in Althea's barometer; in spite of herself it fell a little, and she caught the sound of a faint sighing in the wind, and felt the radiance shadowed by an occasional cloud. For that evening in the shrubbery, when she had for the second time given herself away, had proved the last of her entire freedom with



Mr. Valender. She could no more have sought his society now that she was his affianced wife, than she could before he had become anything to her; her natural sensitiveness had been sharpened to a painful intensity by Miss Wynton's homily, and the deep wound, though healed, had left a scar it might take years to efface.

Was Andrew a little preoccupied over matters connected with business—did he linger somewhat longer with Miss Wynton than seemed to Althea necessary, when her heart was hungering for a return of that deeper self he had betrayed, before they were finally pledged to each other—by no word or glance did she express the feeling; and whatever suffering might be going on in secret, it was certain Mr. Valender would have the most unexacting of women to call his own.

Just now, even, when he had met her according to appointment, and Althea had looked forward to that brief journey through London together as the one last bit of happiness before a parting she dreaded—it was not the Andrew of dear Elm-leigh memories who sat beside her, ready to seize the fleeting opportunity for last words and future plans: it was young Mr. Valender, with coat of irreproachable cut, and linen of spotless whiteness; a little silent and distrait; anxious, lest they were a trifle late; keeping a quick glance at the turnings of streets, and occasionally warning "Cabby," through the glass partition, to put on more steam. And when they stopped at last, with three minutes to spare, how could he exchange congratulations so airily with the obsequious cabman at such a moment as that, and toss him an extra shilling for having "breathed" his horse for their advantage?

Althea's heart sank with a curious sickness. She did not know the Londoner's horror of losing trains; still less could she know that her companion had just hurried away from a trying interview with his uncle, who had chosen to answer his particular letter in person that morning. Could she have known it—had Andrew opened his heart to her, instead of

withholding what he thought would only worry her on the eve of departure—Althea would have found a way to dispel the shared trouble in the sunshine of her loving womanhood. As it was, though she yearned for one token of his pledged affection, it was simply impossible to her nature to seek it by word or sign. A great shyness had come over her, covering all the passion of her being in a mantle of snow. She only thought, as she turned away, how she loved and admired the easy grace of the tall, flexible figure, even while the light laugh with which he dismissed their driver jarred upon her ears.

"You are glad we are in time?" was her reply to his congratulations, when he had, after careful survey, ensconced her in a compartment to his mind, with two elderly ladies at the other end.

And at another time he would have detected a faint sadness under the quiet tone.

"Yes, indeed! but we shaved it too closely. I was sorry for the poor hack on such a day. But you would have been obliged to take the last, slow train, if we had missed this one; as it is, you will have a comfortable journey, in spite of the heat, for there is always a breeze."

"Yes." Althea could not say more. She wished he would not spend the last few moments in securing the blind to shield her from the sunbeams, when she could have done all that, herself, by-and-by; she was longing for one word, one glance of the lover upon whose breast she had wept happy tears two days ago, and yet whose dislike to demonstrations before strangers she knew too well to disturb.

Yet, as he hurried back from the bookstall with the mental provision he believed necessary to a long monotonous journey, a timid touch, that somehow felt like a caress in disguise, brought his eyes suddenly to her face. They went beyond it, too, even at that moment; but seeing that the two faces at the other end of the carriage were not to be deceived in a

matter of such interest, Andrew allowed himself to give in, though he had a distinct horror of playing the lover before spectators.

"Well, Althie?" he asked in the old tender, playful tone she knew so well; and the dumb caress was returned instantly, by the little dark travelling glove being taken into the light grey one, and held fast.

It unsealed her lips, even while it made them tremble.

"You will write, Andrew?"

The words were hardly above a whisper, but they explained the touch that had seemed like the flutter of a little bird, and the meaning of the strange yearning in the brown eyes; and his own softened eloquently.

"Was that the question that was faltering on your lips? Of course I will. And you too; travellers send first tidings, you know. I shall look out for news of you after to-morrow."

The inexorable whistle sounded, and increased the trembling of the pathetic mouth.

"And you will come by-and-by?"

"Of course, again." And then he could only answer the eloquent face in one way; so, in spite of old ladies or anybody else, his head was bared a moment, and Althea felt the long moustache brush her lips.

"Good bye, dear."

"Good bye."

And for a long, long time after the hands had parted, Althea gazed steadfastly out of window, seeing no single feature of the landscape through which she was passing; only so far awake to the present as to know that her eyes were wet with the tears she was ashamed to show, and torturing herself as to whether her lover had been drawn into that rare demonstrativeness against his will.

But that low farewell had fallen like music on her ear: it sounded strangely sweet, almost like a blessing, and Althea began to be content with her lover as he was. No "passionate

pilgrim," as he had himself said: no, and therefore one small endearing word from him meant whole volumes of adjectives from more unrestrained natures.

And thus it came about that Althea never opened her newspaper or book, all that long homeward way, and that the familiar land-marks were perceptible before she was prepared for them; and then, with a start, she recognized well the old station she had left, it would seem a lifetime ago, and well-known figures waiting her arrival.

With a sudden, swift pang came the remembrance of her words to Edmund, "I shall come back just as I go;" and in that instant of her return she realized their futility. For, ah me! had her father looked quite so weather-beaten before she went away? and had Edmund always worn clothes of such homely and countrified fashion? or was it only contrast and comparisons that had affected her vision?

Poor Althea! A terrible sense of self-degradation smote her, at such unworthy ideas even suggesting themselves; and the next moment the train stopped, and the "professor's" bright face was looking in, and Edmund and he were eager for the first embrace.

It was good, restful, to feel their loving arms about her; yet again, with a torturing self-accusation came the contrast of these open caresses with the restrained sweetness of the last that had touched her; and involuntarily, as Edmund gathered up her belongings, his sister stretched out her hand for the uncut literature, feeling a curious sort of jealousy over the papers she had not even cared to read.

"And Mamsey," she asked when preliminaries were duly settled, and they were on their way through the strangely quiet streets—father and son talking eagerly, with their long-lost girl between them: "tell me how Mamsey is?"

"Oh! as blithe as a lark," was the "professor's" cheery reply. "She has been a bit tired now and then, of course, for we have had such oppressive heat, and it was unfortunate about Kitty,

just when you were out; but she's all right again, and the mother is in a flutter of expectation all to-day."

"God bless her!" came involuntarily from Althea's lips, and her heart beat quicker; yet, as they turned into Castle Street, she hated herself that her first thought was, of how that unpretending little tenement would necessarily strike a stranger on his first arrival, which might be before many days were passed.

And then a bright, dear face appeared at one of the lower windows, and the humble home was glorified instantly, and Althea felt her old true self returning, with the clasp of her mother's arms: the touch broke up the fountain of feeling restrained all that day, and as she passed the familiar threshold once again, she could not hold back her sobs.

No one knew the mingled feelings that were finding relief in those raining tears. The old affections that were rushing back in redoubled measure; the new tie that had already bound her so completely, that her sense of identity was half lost in another's being; the misgivings of the last day or two, the self-reproach that any sordid thought should dim the brightness of the return to such a home—all this, together with a dim sense that the figure she held so closely felt more frail than ever before, made Althea's first arrival a perfect storm of emotion.

And then the front door burst open, and Jack rushed in to find the little entrance hall full to overflowing, and his father asking the weeping Althea if she were so sorry to get home again; while in the background stood Kitty with a petrified countenance, exclaiming breathlessly, "Laws! is Miss 'Thea ill? I thought I heard the 'bus, and was just going to bring in tea."

"Bring it in, by all means, Kitty," was the reply, in the mother's clear, bright tone, that had somehow a ring of Miss Grace's decision, without its asperity. "Nothing is the matter, and nobody is ill. We are only settling down after a long

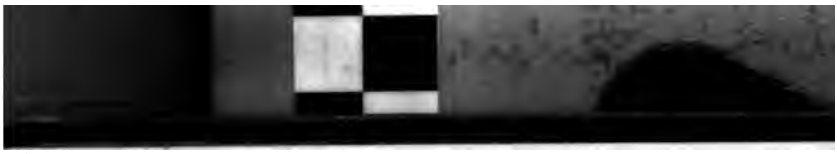
separation." And, leading Althea into the drawing-room, she closed the door upon them for a minute, and placed her in an armchair. "You poor, tired, famished child!" she exclaimed; for Mamsey was such a rare traveller she always imagined people must be ravenous at the end of a journey. "No wonder you feel upset; and men are so stupid, they cannot see an inch beyond their noses. There, dry your eyes and come to tea, and we'll have a good talk afterwards."

"Indeed I'm not hungry, mother, not anything like so spent as that at least. But oh! Mamsey," she cried, "tell me, is it that you are really so much more fragile, or is it Aunt Grace's stout proportions that make the contrast?"

"I have felt the heat, dear, and I dare say that has made me rather thin; but it is Aunt Grace that has misled you, no doubt. You don't want to see your mother as substantial, yet awhile, I hope. You must give me nearly twenty years to overtake Grace."

It was a very happy evening, after all. It is true, Althea felt a great longing, after tea, for the breadth and coolness of the Elm-leigh drawing-room, or, better still, the seclusion of the shrubbery, with its ancient trees; and she wondered afresh that she had never noticed before how small and close the home rooms seemed at the end of a hot day; nevertheless, it was home, and by-and-by they all forgot the heat, in the story of Althea's wonderful visit.

She had meant to reserve Mr. Valender's share in it for the present, solely for her mother's ears; but the others were not to be deceived, and most of the facts were in possession of the whole home circle before they broke up for the night. It affected them in different ways. The "professor" was astounded beyond measure, for in all allusions to Mr. Valender in Althea's home letters he had figured so entirely as Miss Conway's friend that it took her father a long while to adjust his ideas to the new order of things, though Mamsey declared she was not the least surprised; she had seen it coming, all along, and



only wondered that the same thought had never struck the others.

"Though, to be sure," she added, "I was the only woman of the party, and men's perceptions are proverbially dense."

"Then you saw more than actually existed," was her husband's aggrieved reply, "for the child says she was taken by surprise herself, only three days ago."

"There are times when every woman is a word-painter," said the mother, oracularly. "Althea unconsciously dipped her brush in gold when a certain name was her subject, and one side of the affair was clear to all but the blind; as to the other side, I had my own private ideas even there."

But the "professor's" gratification and pleasure at least equalled his surprise, when the latter had somewhat abated; and as he bade his tall girl good night, he playfully pinched her cheek, whispering—

"So Althea *has* really met her Lovelace, and my unconscious prophecy was destined to come true (if he prove satisfactory, at least), and we shall have a 'Wedding March' after all."

"Oh, father, *don't!* Mr. Valender is no Lovelace; and as for the 'Wedding March,' that will not be wanted for years yet. There is much to think of before that."

Edmund caught the sigh that followed, and his eyes alone saw the little start of pain with which his sister shrank from the playful, jesting words; it looked as though they had fallen on a scarcely-healed wound. He had been, as usual, the quiet one of the party, observing much, but speaking little; and now, while Jack turned to work off his first excitement by a perfect volley of crashing chords on the long-suffering piano, followed by a peal of imaginary wedding-bells, his sister missed Edmund's voice for the first time.

"Are you not glad, Teddy?" she whispered; and her face was strangely wistful as the caressing arm stole round his shoulder in the old fashion.

"I am always slow, Al; never mind me. I must reserve my gladness till I have seen Mr. Valender."

"But I *do* mind you." And putting her cheek to his for a moment, Althea would have added more, but that Jack turned round to exclaim—

"I can't believe it. Beanstick engaged! Beanstick going to be married! Then she'll never take the hurdles any more, now; and there's an end to all the fun." And the next moment the piano broke forth into the mournful, "All is lost."

Althea slipped away while the strain was yet in progress, for, late though it was, she had seen her father take down his book as she left, and knew there was still a chance of a few quiet words with Mamsey; she felt as though sleep would be impossible till her heart was in some measure satisfied with a judgment beyond her own. She waited in her own little room till a scrambling scuffle on the stairs, and a sounding blow on the door from Jack's fist, in passing, assured her anew that she was at home again; for the Elm-leigh corridors gave back no echoing footfalls to the keenest ear: then, flinging on her light dressing-gown, she was soon peeping in at her mother's door.

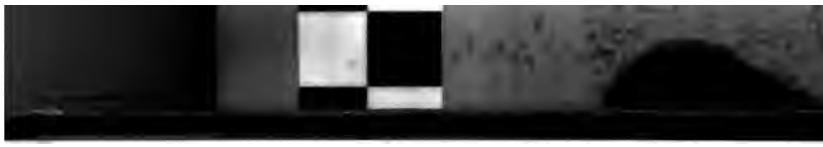
"Not asleep, Mamsey?"

"Come in, child. I knew I should have you; your eyes said as much over your good night. Now tell me all about it; I'm as wideawake as a schoolgirl listening to a first-love story."

And, indeed, the bright youthful face on the pillows, with its warm colour and sunny hair tucked hastily away into the babyish little cap, did not look unlike that of a schoolgirl, as it turned eagerly to welcome its visitor. Althea popped out her light, and nestling into the screening curtain of the bed, slipped on her knees beside it, with her face just touching the other face upon the pillows.

"What a Mamsey it is!" were her first words. "Why, mother, you never can or will grow old, I do believe."

"Perhaps not," was the mother's reply, with a half sigh that



was instantly checked. "People with boys and girls like mine have no time to think about getting old till they find they have done so. But come, Althea, I am burning to hear, and there is no time to lose. We 'snatch a fearful joy,' you know. It reminds me of long-gone days at school, when we put out our light, and stole to each others' rooms for a talk, quaking all the while lest Miss Horton should discover us."

"Daddy's wrath would be much easier to face, though, wouldn't it, mother?"

And whether the "professor" guessed the innocent scheme to deceive him, or whether his book proved really very seductive at that hour is hard to say; anyway, Althea had time to unburden her mind about many things before the sound of a door downstairs warned her to escape; and it was with a heart eased, comforted, and strengthened, that she stole away in the dark to bed.

For Mamsey believed in Andrew, and that was enough. Mamsey's quick perceptions had grasped the parts of the picture where Althea's outlines were indistinct, and she believed with all her soul in the elevating influence of woman's love. Her own warm mother-heart was yearning already over the man who had missed his share in the blessing of a true mother; and, as to the rest, if he had learned to love her child, that one fact covered a multitude of sins.

"He must come soon," was her last waking thought; "I long to see and know him for myself, and life is short and uncertain at the best. He must certainly come soon."

While Althea overhead, at her evening prayer, had just poured out her full heart in a few broken words of thanksgiving for the joy she felt at last assured of; and, after coupling with the name that had just set her life to music, the other name that had been the first her baby lips had learned to utter, she fell into a sleep as innocent and tranquil as that of an infant.

CHAPTER XIV.

A GUEST-CHAMBER.

"The little nameless unremembered acts
Of kindness and of love."

WORDSWORTH.

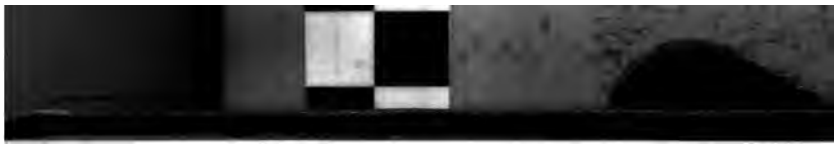
"We must have a weak spot or two in a character before we can love it much. People that do not laugh or cry, or take more of anything than is good for them, or use anything but dictionary words, are admirable subjects for biographies. But we don't always care for those flat-pattern flowers that press best in the herbarium."—O. W. HOLMES.

"LIFE is made up of very little things," had been Althea's remark to Miss Wynton, a short time back, and the weeks that followed her return to Harington did not cause her to alter her view.

She had gone to rest, after that half-hour beside her mother's bed, feeling as if she had passed into a haven of blissful peace, after the rude storms and tempests of the previous days, and that no wild alarms could ever again assail her; but poor Althea's little bark was not of the nature to sail with unruffled course, or to make the voyage of life without stress of weather.

What a bright face was hers next morning, as she went about her household tasks with willing interest, knowing that the afternoon would be all her own for the joy of writing her first letter to Mr. Valender!

The mother knew all about it, and had given secret orders that she was not to be disturbed; but Althea heard sundry little



scuffles outside the door before she could even begin, for the few minutes after leaving the table were always lively times in the Castle Street home before dispersing to business, and the music-master was apt to be as frolicsome at times as his grown-up lads. Althea had secured the door from intrusion, but she well knew there was merriment going on without at her expense, for Jack's hoarse whisper came through the key-hole, with the offer of a new pen for Beanstick for the solemn occasion; followed by the mother's half-laughing remonstrance—

"Go away, Jack; I tell you, I will *not* have her disturbed."

But even after her father had put a roguish face into the drawing-room window, with "his compliments to Lovelace," and Edmund had drawn Jack away, and she was left in peace, Althea found her task less easy than she had expected; and three successive letters were written and destroyed before she could make up her mind to despatch one of them. Her real self came out in the first, but, upon re-reading it, Miss Wynton's homily returned with a sharp pang, and she struck her pen through all the more endearing phrases: hers was no passionate lover, who revelled in lover-like language; a long letter might weary him; a demonstrative one might be still more distasteful. So, at the end of a couple of hours' close meditation, the letter of a single sheet (with truthful affection on the surface, and passionate love held in so completely, that only a keen eye could read it between the lines) was signed simply—

"Your loving friend,

"ALTHEA."

Even then it was read over several times before folding, and at length, with cheeks burning with conflicting feelings, the writer sought her mother, and put the still open sheet into her hands.

Mamsey looked up with natural hesitation from her work.

"My child! Not to read it, surely? There are sacred reserves even from mothers, you know."

"I know, mother dear. But just this once I wish it; it will be a relief."

Even yet, Mamsey glanced up into the warm half-tired face above her, and a shade passed over her own.

"Child," she cried, with an earnestness unusual with her, "nothing can be sweeter to a mother than her children's perfect confidence; it is all sweet to me, but sometimes I fear not all good for them, if they lean upon me instead of acquiring self-reliance. It has dawned upon me lately, that you mistrust your own judgment too much, my dear one."

"Nevertheless, read this one first letter, Mamsey; I will depend upon myself next time."

It did not take long to read, and a momentary wonder crossed the mother's mind at the contrast between its tone and that of the few she had sent to Roy, in the days of her youth. She looked up at length with a half troubled—

"It is a sweet little letter—for those who can read deep enough. And yet it seems—— My darling, you are surely not afraid of Mr. Valender?"

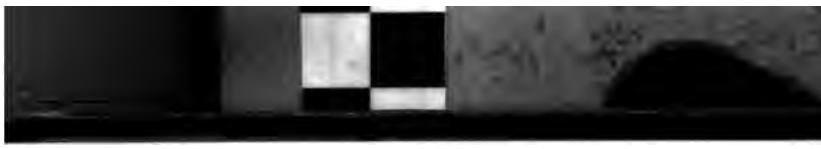
"I hardly know, myself, Mamsey. At times I could show him my heart of hearts; while at others, it seems as if even to speak without invitation would be impossible."

"And, '*Your friend*,' Althea! Are you only to be his friend?" pursued the mother, with a glance at the signature.

"He will understand that," was the reply, as Althea took her letter, and proceeded to fold it for post. "He called me friend the day he asked for something more. We understand each other there."

"Well, I shall see him for myself, before long, I trust. You did not know your father had a letter at mid-day, and is posting his reply already. But put this into your letter before closing, child. See, mine has not taken half the time to prepare. But then, to be sure, I do not know what a terrible young man I am dealing with."

That was a sweet little letter too, in a different way, Althea



thought, as she ran her eyes over the lines. Very short, and entirely unconventional, but with a certain bright hopefulness about it that crept into all that Mamsey had to do with ; ending with a hope that she and her husband might speedily become acquainted with one who had such an interest for them, since he had learned to love their child.

How Althea wondered what the answer would be to these two epistles ! and how the time dragged till the morning of the expected reply.

And when the postman's ring sounded through the house, she did not rush for a letter as she had expected to do. The same strange shyness of any over-eagerness held her back, as the boys were at hand. Better, every way, to be quiet and wait.

But when the party met at breakfast, and she saw at a glance that nothing awaited herself, her heart stood still for an instant with a strange sickness, as she silently took her place. Her parents were too absorbed, at first, in a letter from their eldest son, to think of anything else ; and when Mamsey did at length recall the expected letter, Althea's face startled her—it looked as though it were settling into stone.

"No bad news, surely, child?" she asked in an anxious half-whisper.

"No news of any sort, mother." And somehow the voice was not like Althea's at all ; it had a curious muffled sound, as if from a far distance.

"No news always means good news," cried Mamsey, with a desperate eagerness. "You will hear this afternoon, never fear." But her eyes sought her husband's with a dim foreboding, even while she spoke words of cheer.

Suddenly it seemed to the girl as if the very heavens themselves were opening to her relief; for there, close before her eyes, lay the precious letter, as if it had indeed dropped from the skies ; and then joy did what sorrow had failed to do, for, convulsed with sobs—loud as a child's, but deep as those of a grieved woman —Althea fled from the room with her treasure in her hands.

And soon it transpired that it was all that abominable Jack's doing; that a spirit of mischief had led him to conceal the letter under one of the breakfast dishes, to watch results, till warned by appearances that it was time to throw light upon the subject.

The little mother turned upon her youngest with a severity he had perhaps never experienced in his life before.

"I am ashamed of you, Jack" (and indeed she looked like it, for her eyes were flashing as they had rarely done since girlish days). "Sport that makes light of another's pain is unworthy of a son of mine."

"I don't think he meant it," put in the "professor," mildly. "He could not know Althea would take it so to heart." For Jack was speechless under his mother's censure, and, indeed, his subdued face conquered her sudden anger as speedily as it had arisen.

She was leaving the room as she spoke to hasten after the weeping Althea, but she paused to press a kiss in passing, on her boy's downcast brow.

"You meant it for fun, after all," she said, "and could not know that you were playing a dangerous game. But by-and-by, if you are a *good* man, you will understand."

And, lingering no longer, with the mother-love urging her into greater eagerness for the delay, she reached the stair-head as swiftly as her daughter had done, and then had to suffer for her precipitation in a way that was becoming far too frequent nowadays. Half a minute she stood, with hands pressed upon her heart to subdue the almost suffocating throbs; and then, only waiting to get back breath and calmness, she passed with the old brightness on her brow into Althea's room.

Althea sprang up at the sound, and locked her mother in her arms with an almost convulsive pressure. Mamsey could feel the trembling of the whole frame, and she knew that something far more than mere relief, after disappointment, lay beneath all this agitation; and her old anxieties for this

peculiarly-constituted nature came rushing back with all their former intensity.

For a few moments, while they clung to each other in that close embrace that conveys far more than words, the mother's thoughts were far less tranquil than usual, and Althea's first words, as she raised her head at last with a sigh of relief, were—

"Forgive me; I could not help it. But oh, Mamsey! what should I ever do without you?"

A shade of pain crossed the face upon which she gazed, as the mother gently put from her the clinging arms; and there was that in the action which seemed to embody some inner meaning.

"Althea, child," she said, "it is sweet to lean, but it is better to *learn*. Life's meanings only open bit by bit, as we learn to face them for ourselves. I would shield you all your life if possible, but a mother can only lead her children half-way; there comes a time when all she can do is to bid them God-speed."

"That time is not come for us yet though, mother."

"I think it is, Al—for *you*. Now tell me if there is any letter for me, as well as for yourself."

Yes, there were two letters, and they satisfied both recipients.

Althea did not offer to share hers this time, though it was guiltless of love epithets as her own had been: she looked up at last with a smile playing like a sunbeam over a rain-drenched garden.

"It is all right, Al, I can see by your face. And he tells me he wants to come on Saturday week to spend Sunday, and make a closer acquaintance with us all, if convenient. Closer acquaintance, by the way! I thought we should have to begin at the beginning, and not at the second volume."

"He is quite correct, Mamsey. He liked the first so much that he wants to go on with the story. He knows you all, already,—even to Kitty and her misadventures."

The words recalled the mother to a remembrance of household duties waiting attention.

"I hear your father fidgeting below, and we must go now, Althea. But, child, tell me—was it your Aunt Grace's prediction that was in your mind just now, when you were so overwhelmed?"

"Yes, mother; partly. I cannot quite shake it off. But my letter has made me happy."

Mamsey looked only half satisfied. "It was not *partly*, in my young days," she said: "it was overhead and ears with a bound, and the thing was done and past recall, and there was an end of it. Your father and I only saw one side of the square, and rushed at it; afterwards came the time to find three other sides, and adapt ourselves accordingly. Perhaps yours is the better way; but, Al dear, just one hint. Ready-made heroes are scarce enough in real life—as scarce as heroines and the heroic. We must take things on trust, and not despair because we see no sprouting wings yet awhile. Commonplace life together is the best; if at the end of *that* there is a little more of the hero rather than a little less, it is as much as some of us can expect."

"You mean that I have too high an ideal?" asked Althea. But her question was destined to get no immediate response, for, on leaving the room together, they almost stumbled upon Jack, who—with an awed feeling that his sister had somehow passed out of the familiar everyday life into an unknown state in which hysteria would be only a lesser experience—was hanging disconsolately over the balustrades, with his mother's vinaigrette in one hand and some loathsome-looking salts in the other, feeling too guilty to precipitate matters.

"Are you better now, Al?" he asked, in the low voice with which one greets an invalid in an advanced state of disease; for, to Jack's wondering fancy, the sister who had never known a day's illness in her life hitherto, might be a victim already to swoons, and other fine-lady maladies.

Althea's face was still tear-stained, but she broke into a most reassuring peal of merriment, that sent the Castle Street barometer up instantly with marvellous decision.

"What has the precious boy possessed himself of?" she asked, as her father and Edmund appeared below, with most relieved faces. "He has actually rummaged out Kitty's harts-horn and salts, thinking I was faint! Oh, Jack, Jack! did you think I had fallen so low as that? I *couldn't* faint, dear, if I tried hard. There, put that bottle away before Kitty comes; and if ever I do disgrace myself so far, I give you leave to punish me with that."

Jack's relief was unbounded. He knew his sister's tongue ran on so fast to set him at his ease, and show him he was forgiven for his freak, and his acknowledgment found vent in a grateful hug; but still, unwonted depression was forced to surrender to extra exhilaration, and Althea must be taught that even hysteria had to pay its way.

"A chair—a chair!" he shouted. "Come, Teddy, my boy, lend a hand to distressed damsels! She will inevitably fall headlong if we trust her alone down this Jacob's ladder of a staircase—just recovered, as she is, from a deadly faint. Bring a chair, I say."

"I shall inevitably fall if I trust myself to your tender mercies, Jack: never think I am going to venture it." But in spite of earnest remonstrances from both mother and daughter, the lads had their way, and Althea made her perilous descent aloft on their shoulders, with Kitty and her master for spectators at the foot of the precipice.

"Are you going to be our Al of old days again?" Jack whispered, in the moment of departure, when order had been at last restored.

"I have never been anything else, have I, dear Jack?" was the wondering reply.

"*Is* it our own old Al that has come back to us?" he persisted. "Since Lovelace came on the scenes, it seems to

me it is the *Lady Althea*, with more tears in four and twenty hours than she used to shed in as many months."

His sister looked very penitent. "I think the old Al will come back by-and-by," she said, very gently, "only you must give her time, and bear with her oddities. Anyway, you have taught her not to run away from the breakfast table again in a hurry."

The sunshine had come back, as we have said, with the London letter, yet the week that followed was not one of unbroken sunshine for Althea, even with the knowledge that the end of it was to bring Andrew Valender; for while her heart went out in hungry longing to see his face again, it fluttered with many a misgiving between whiles. Would he be once more as he had been in the shrubbery; or would that slight intangible barrier be between them she felt so powerless to break down?

Once married, Althea had not the slightest doubt of her power to make him happy. It was not self-distrust of what her mother had called the true testing time: the Rubicon once passed, she knew that she could enter upon the long uneventful years with a spirit as bright and free as Mamsey's own. In her estimation, the testing time lay on this side the barrier.

Petty, miserable cares, too, stinted her cup of anticipatory joy, and made the girl wince with that curious self-disdain she had felt when first returning home. How would these small rooms strike the ease-loving Andrew? Would he think their life more pitifully narrow than she had led him to expect? And the *organist*—— Althea would rush away, and plunge into some occupation, from sheer inability to meet these curious questions with any sensible answer.

"Now that's what I call a pictur'!" remarked Kitty to her young mistress, the day before the expected arrival, as they met on the threshold of the guest-chamber towards the end of the morning.

Kitty's face was moist from honest labour, and as she stood

in the doorway with the pails and brooms she was about to remove from the scene, she might be excused a certain radiant complacency in achieved results. "Something attempted, something done"—what higher success can any of us win than that?

Yet Althea had her excuses, too, if her face was less radiant as she acknowledged her Abigail's zeal; and Kitty, detecting a certain lack of unction in the tone, prudently withdrew. Honest Kitty loved her art of cleanliness for its own sake, as much as any painter loved his; therefore, how sweet soever praise might be, its loss would not have power to dismay either the one or the other.

"A picture?" repeated Althea to herself with a sigh, as her critical gaze took in the whole effect with a swift glance—"a picture, indeed! A 'Dutch Interior,' possibly, but with none of Tenier's loving skill. Hard, bare detail, with no softening shadows—no suggestive touches—no background, and no setting."

It was another of the "little things." Poor Althea half envied Kitty her honest pleasure in those spotless boards, now fast drying in the summer air; in that sparse furniture, polished to mirror-like brightness; in that old-fashioned carpet, brushed to immaculate neatness. Yet, ah me! after Elm-leigh, with the harmonious tints and soft draperies and mellowed refinements of its guest-rooms, this obtrusive cleanliness had in it something almost workhouse-like to Althea's present humour.

So a cloud had come again between her and her sunlight, and her face was downcast as she went about, doing what she could for the poor, bald room; surely the window-curtains had not always had such meagre folds, nor the empty spaces been so painfully pronounced, between the spindle-legged furniture! Or was this only another case of the opening of the eyes to a sense of nakedness?

"Was it this that made me drink in beauty so eagerly elsewhere?" thought the girl, as she went to and from her own

little room, bringing every small treasure she could find, to relieve the blankness of that other apartment; but with a sorrowful misgiving all the while that it was like the piece of cloth on the old garment—the two agreeing not together.

Mrs. Holmes had heard the hurrying footsteps, and guessed something of the state of affairs, therefore she was not surprised to hear the old call, at last—

"Mamsey, do come for a minute; I want you."

Althea's flushed cheeks were a sure indication of inward worry of some sort; the mother glanced from them to the dressing-table, with its array of miniature "properties," and could not forbear a passing smile, though she would not for worlds have added to the trouble by any lack of sympathy.

"Does it do, mother?" was the doubtful inquiry.

"*Does* it do, Althea?" was the counter question. But there was no doubt at all in this one.

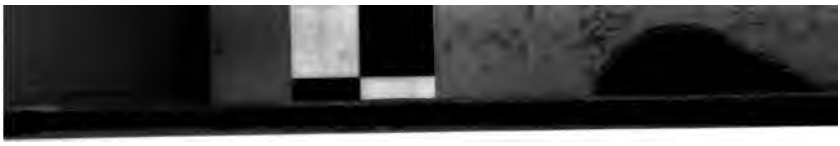
Althea swept her little collection aside, with another sigh.

"I go round and round a subject, and you straight to the middle of it, yet our conclusions are the same," she said. "I only waited your judgment to be quite convinced."

"My dear, I was merely thinking that what might be suitable enough for a schoolgirl would most likely only embarrass Mr. Valender. Young men don't generally care for mats and vases in their bedrooms; they would greatly prefer the space they occupy."

"True enough," rejoined Althea; adding disconsolately, half under her breath, "It seems to me that it is more space than anything else, here, however."

"I would not worry about it, dear. Mr. Valender is coming for something much more interesting than the most superlative upholstery. If we had a pavilion of roses, he should be its honoured guest; we cannot do more than give him our best, even if it be a plainly-furnished room. And, after all, Al, it seems to me, certain plain rooms are like certain plain faces; there is a charm in their very homeliness if they are honest and



sincere. But let a plain face attempt to disguise patent facts, by artificial means, and one can only pity the painful mistake."

Althea carried off all her treasures, and returned with the cloud somewhat lifted from her brow.

"What a thing it is to have a philosopher always on the spot!" she said fondly, as her arm stole round her mother's waist; "and such a *little* philosopher, too, with its five-feet stature, and its pretty pink cheeks, and wavy hair! Yet, oh, Mamsey!"—with a sudden change of tone—"do *you* ever recall Elm-leigh nowadays, and that unmistakable something in a home that has mellowed into ripeness; not faded like cheap, common things?"

"Yes, dear—I know. Your letters brought everything back as vividly as if I were in the midst of it. But I don't suffer as much as you would in my place, Al. Beauty is welcome, but not essential to me; or rather, I have found another sort of beauty in my living treasures."

"Yet even you see at a glance the baldness of this room, mother? It must be partly that it has had so little life in it, so few memories, seeing guests are rare with us."

"It will soon have memories of its own, now Mr. Valender is coming, and Frank and Louise soon after, to wake its echoes," was the smiling reply. Then suddenly leaving her daughter's encircling arms, Mamsey exclaimed, "But my little couch, Althea! We never thought of that; it would help to remove 'baldness,' as you call it, better than miniature vases, and give quite a touch of luxury to the foot of the bed."

"But, mother—your own little sofa?—you would miss it so!"

"Miss it for two days? I hope I am not come to that just yet, child. Come, we'll carry it in between us, and astonish Kitty; she will think we have taken leave of our senses to effect such revolutions!"

"Oh, Mamsey, not *you!*" cried Althea. "Let me call Kitty, or we will wait for the boys; it is too heavy for you."

"Nonsense!" was the quick, half-imperious answer. For Mamsey was foolishly eager about trifles, and her old trick of "rushing at one side of the square," as she had herself expressed it, had not been cured even yet, in spite of all her philosophy. Perhaps even Socrates and Plato had their crotchets, if we only knew their private life sufficiently. "Call Kitty to carry a little light couch when two grown women are on the spot? Why, you know, Al, as well as I do, that it would take about a century to make Kitty stir from the task of the moment, and another century to win her to our ideas. If you take the head, I will carry the light end. Come, I shall pick it up and run off with it myself, if you stand debating much longer."

It was but a few steps of transit, yet they cost several moments of mortal anguish at the end; and Althea's face grew almost whiter than her mother's as she saw the result of the rash decision. With a cry of terror the girl was rushing off for any restorative she could find; but a resolute grasp of her wrist detained her, and after a few gasps the mother was able to speak again.

"You were right, Al," she said faintly, "and I deserve as much and more, for being self-willed. But I heard your father come in, and you must not tell him. It is passing quite away. Don't look so terrified, dearest; it is almost gone: and I will be warned by you, and never be so foolish again."

"You owe it to every one of us to keep that promise," said Althea, with a great choke in her voice. "Tell me, mother, have you ever suffered like this before?"

"Yes, many times, at intervals," was the reluctant answer. "But it warns me to take greater care, and I will keep my promise. There—don't keep your father waiting. And, Althea, mind what I say; not a word to him about what you saw just now. I will not have him made unhappy without cause."

"You must make another promise to me, then—to lie down

quietly all this afternoon while I finish my sewing, otherwise I shall fetch a doctor to you, mother."

"I will certainly lie down. Don't look so unhappy, child. I will obey you as meekly as a lamb."

And she kept her promise to a certain extent, and went dutifully to her couch directly the house was quiet after dinner, but not to sleep, as Althea hoped. The pain was all gone, long ago; but for a little while the brave spirit was quelled at a thought that had returned with determined persistency of late.

Life was sweet, and they had all been so happy. Not full of the wild bliss she and Roy had imagined would always be theirs that daring morning when they had joined hands in their youth—that had sobered down speedily enough, and hundreds of times they had had to go without what many people would deem necessaries: but it was a married life that somehow even the sunbeams seemed to love. Mamsey did not care much to live to old age; but oh, she would like to stay to see her children equipped for the voyage of life—not to leave in the middle of the story like this, with everything unsettled!

Once see Arthur promoted, Edmund through his course, and Jack's future provided for (alas, poor Jack! where was anything like a provision for him?), and that eager, earnest girl, her firstborn, happy with the husband of her choice—Mamsey thought, if God should call her then, she would be content to lead the way through the "dark gates" that she might cheer Roy to follow her.

For he would never face death first, she knew. He clung to the sunlight in every shape and form, hoping even yet for more prosperous days, though she knew well no outward prosperity was ever in store for poor Roy. Could it be that, she being gone before him, he would bravely follow her to a happier land, where "success" is not measured as the world measures it here?

"I have not been religious, I know," thought the little mother, humbly, in her dim, imperfect reasoning; "the good books always seemed so hard to follow—the things were so impossible to carry out in my busy life, that they only made me sad. Perhaps I have depended too literally on that one unspeakable act of Love that seems real and new, even after all these centuries; yet, somehow, I never feel afraid. And if I have made a mistake, oh, that tender Face tells me that He will forgive; He will not be angry that I have leaned on Him too much!"

And opening her eyes instinctively to seek the pictured face that had been given her in her childhood, and that had always hung within sight of her little couch, Mamsey missed it for the first time; and that recalled her to the fact of her being in the less familiar spare room, and effectually altered the current of her reflections.

"Poor Althea!" she murmured fondly. "So it is a blank, bald room, is it?" And then she sat up, and took a scrutinizing glance around, and decided that the curtains might be renewed at a trifling cost, even now. "It is not a *necessary*, I know," she said to herself; "but I really think I am justified in the treat of surprising Althea at such a time as this. I do want her to be happy now, if ever in her life."

And in another moment Mrs. Holmes was standing before an open drawer in her own room, and thoughtfully counting over her small private store, with a pensive face. The next minute she was equipped in the black lace shawl and pretty little unfashionable bonnet, and was slipping stealthily down the stairs; for the happy thought of their bride and bridegroom's approaching visit seemed a sufficient justification for the purchase she wished to make.

So while Althea imagined her mother to be enjoying a long quiet sleep, the latter had reached the business part of the town, and was inspecting curtains and draperies of all shades and designs. Alas! the choice was speedily narrowed down

to meet the exceeding shallowness of the little purse; yet there was a certain, bright, swift decision in the purchaser's selection, although it was accompanied by a passing sigh.

Iago's advice to Roderigo to "put money in his purse" has a world-wide significance; and, argue as we will, a silver key sometimes opens to us more than mere tangible good that we can hold and grasp. There is something in free-handedness that wins for itself respect, however fallacious the reasoning, and the broad basis of human nature is the same in a South Sea Islander as in the Englishman of the nineteenth century. So it does not follow that the Harington draper was beneath contempt, if he took Mrs. Holmes's silver shillings with less unction than he would have done her gold. He had seen the momentary wistfulness with which she had turned from the soft rich folds he had first displayed, and knew that it was no lack of taste that had caused so inferior a parcel to be sent to Castle Street. He shared our common nature in its involuntary respect for the "liberal things devised by the liberal," yet he shared it, too, in its other and nobler side; and could he have known how late his recent customer was lingering up in her room that night, to prepare an innocent surprise, he would not have held her lightly, we may be sure.

There were still a few stitches to be added, that Mamsey could not quite overtake; but she was awake in time to finish what had been left, and to finish her night's rest too, before Kitty's knock sounded, and Roy's deep sleep gave way to the new day.

And surely it was the sunny schoolgirl of old days, Althea Wynton, and not Mrs. Holmes, the mother of tall sons, whose eyes were bright with the well-kept secret, as, towards noon that day, she began to lay fairy touches about, and to make the blank old room laugh and sing. She did not call it hard names, and compare it with more favoured apartments, as the other Althea had done: she took it into her confidence, and

just somehow *loved it* into being its best; and lo! the queer room seemed to understand and answer to her touch with electric sympathy. The new curtains that had seemed poor affairs but yesterday beside their costly neighbours, hung daintily enough to-day, and gained a certain marvellous effect under Mamsey's touch, as she stood on a high chair adjusting their fastenings, exulting that Althea had not yet revisited the disparaged guest-room.

An instant's cloud crossed her sky, as the nimble fingers paused over the old ribbon knots that refused to blend with these new arrivals; but the sun appeared again forthwith with another happy thought. A coral-coloured sash of Jack's—one of the relics of baby days that a mother loves to retain—lay among this mother's treasures of long-gone days. She had meant to keep it by her always, in remembrance of her handsome little "pickle" (as Jack had been called at five years old); but another fate awaited it to-day, as the swift scissors severed it in twain. Not ruthless scissors; the low sigh that preceded the decision showed it to be a sacrifice, however slight. And then the mother's eye fell upon a soft Indian shawl in the same drawer—one of her sister Eva's last gifts to her, and treasured all these years for her sake.

"It is a mistake to hoard," she whispered to herself; "who knows what the future has in store?"

What, indeed?

Did I say she made the old room laugh and sing?

If she did—if it broke into happy song with her, at the thought of the coming guest, and joyed with her in the gladness of making glad, I fancy that—lingering in the folds of drapery that she touched—in the soft brightness the couch borrowed from the Indian shawl—in the calm face of the "Good Shepherd" she hung, at the last moment, over the mantelpiece—in and over all these hovered angel wings.

It was no longer a blank room, anyway; and the other Althea would never think it so again. Hers were the eyes to

see deeper than mere new draperies, and tasteful touches of colour; some not far distant day she would recognize the angel visitants.

Little things! Yes, indeed,—it is by little things we travel to Eternity.

CHAPTER XV.

A NEW ELEMENT.

"Looking at the mother, you might hope that the daughter would become like her, which is a prospective advantage equal to a dowry."—GEORGE ELIOT.

A FORAGING expedition for fruit and flowers had kept Althea busy next day; for though the little recreation ground, misnamed a garden, had indeed a charm of its own, its crop of anything worth seeking was a very doubtful quantity.

Fitful and vigorous efforts at reformation had been made from time to time; but a task that belongs to no one in particular, ends by being performed by none. What was the use indeed of scrupulous neatness, when those narrow walks were the scene of endless trials of strength and swiftness—pleasant enough from a boxer's point of view, but far less so from that of a florist? Perhaps they all enjoyed it quite as much as it was—in semi-deshabille: the little grove of nut-trees made delightful seclusion for reading, even though they bore no nuts; the stunted gooseberry bushes were chiefly useful nowadays as points of vantage when teasing brothers were in hot pursuit; and though a gardener would have turned from those borders in disdain, a few hardy, old-fashioned flowers still played their part, and were as well known as the boundary walls.

But they would not do for to-day.

Some one was coming for a taste of country life, to whom the wild flowers had an indescribable charm; and though Althea

was led further in her ramble than she had intended, she returned at length with such treasures of honeysuckle and clematis as went far towards making the unpretentious drawing-room in Castle Street a sylvan bower.

Strawberries, too! Mr. Valender liked strawberries, and Althea had not bought pottles of fruit out of a hot shop-window. She had had far to walk to procure these; but there they were, cool and fresh and juicy. And now she had only just time to change her dress, and go with her father to the station, to meet the expected guest.

She had glorified one room with her flowers, and had given up the bald bedroom as hopeless, without entering it again; but now, as she ran swiftly down, she took one peep at her "Dutch Interior," and then stood spell-bound on the threshold, as if she, like it, were under the spell of an enchantress. No work of an enchantress, this, however. Only some of the pure fragrance Love finds a way to distil from the meanest materials, and which, to those who inhale it, seems to come straight from Heaven.

Nature had been weaving wonders of beauty below, under Althea's tasteful fingers; but this poor upper room was even more glorified. Nature had been at work here, too; she brought her materials straight from the fount of a pure mother-heart, and Love and Self-sacrifice do not fade like the perishing flowers.

Some dim idea of all this passed through Althea's mind, in that astonished pause at the door. Thought travels quickly, and can take in a great deal sometimes in a passing tick of the clock; and now, as her glance fell on the pictured face of the "Good Shepherd," something in its unutterable beauty brought the sudden tears to her eyes, and a choking sensation to her throat, at that particular moment. She could not have explained the reason, if she had tried. It was, somehow, the bringing together of three kinds of Love—the two infinitely tender human ties, blended and sanctified in the Divine.

This—with a confused, half conscious yearning that the picture, that was so much to Mamsey, might have its influence on Andrew Valender—made Althea's face more eloquent than her voice, as she flew to her mother's side.

"Mamsey! *Dear* Mamsey!"

Althea could get no further just then; her voice choked, but she had said more than enough. And oh! if there are any mothers to whom these small secrets and sacrifices are unintelligible, I think they are to be pitied, in what they lose. If such mothers could only once taste the pure pleasure of sharing their children's burdens in ever so small a way—if they only knew how mighty a power these trifles have, in tightening the bonds of home and giving a sacredness to family life, they would have a different idea about the "little things."

But, as I said, *this* mother understood. She was sitting in her sunny window, crimping in her fingers the soft lace she had just taken up, when Althea came in like a whirlwind; and something in her tall girl's face was irresistible, as she knelt at Mamsey's side. It was not only that the fresh white dress she had donned for this important occasion became her so well; but the brown eyes, shaded by the little drooping white feather, were radiant at this moment with something deeper than joy, and every line of her face betrayed the emotion she felt it impossible to express.

The mother saw it all, and her own eyes grew a little misty, though she promptly asserted her authority.

"Why, goosie, you will never get through the world if you are to do no better than this! Spoiling your eyes, just when you are going to the station—whoever heard of such a thing? I never did that in my young days, you may be sure! There, run away this moment; your father's waiting."

"But, mother, that beautiful Indian shawl of Aunt Eva's! Oh, how good you are! And Jack's ribbons, too—I knew them at a glance! And you prized them so!"

"They are better where they are, child. But the couch

looks pretty, doesn't it? If your hero chooses to stretch his long limbs upon it, I only hope it won't give way under him. But do go now; your father hates to be kept."

And, indeed, the remark was justified. A terrific sound below, that Kitty always termed "Master making the pianna holloa," warned Althea that her time was more than expired, and the two were soon making the best of their way. Neither spoke much of the coming meeting. Althea was in a curious whirl of conflicting feelings now the actual moment had arrived; while the secret admission must be made that the organist was not quite himself, in the prospect of receiving his future son-in-law.

It is true that, whatever his sphere in life, how limited soever his social status, there was nothing of the boor in Mamsey's husband. If he mingled little with his kind, his literary and musical tastes prevented the need of society; and whether his professional duties called him among his equals or superiors, he was alike courteous and gentlemanly, because, above all things, *natural*. But conscious as he was of the light in which Elmleigh regarded him, it would be a little trying to receive this member of the Elm-leigh life and ideas. Roy thought to himself, if Andrew Valender had been a total stranger, not one so intimately associated with his wife's relations, he would have rejoiced to welcome him for his own sake, as well as Althea's. Whereas now, hampered as he was by a foregone conclusion that he was secretly apologized for, the poor "professor" could not help seeing himself in the same distorted vision as the Wyntons' own.

He was not going to be afraid of Lovelace, though—not he! If Elm-leigh was kind enough to look down upon him as from a superior height, there was one vulgarity of which none should accuse him—they should never say he cringed to those whom the mere accident of birth had placed on a higher footing than his own. And it was well for Althea that she was all unconscious of this inward debate, or she might have trembled

lest her father, in his care to avoid the Scylla of servility, should be drawn into the Charybdis of pretentiousness.

The clanging bell sounded almost as soon as they reached their destination, and as the London train steamed in, no one, glancing casually at the tall girl in white, could have guessed how fast her heart was beating; her eyes had swept the line of carriages at a glance, and had descried the one figure of all others before the train came to a stand, but not even to her father did she betray what she had seen. The same hesitation, the same cruel shyness had come back with the thought of Miss Wynton's terrible homily, and now kept her standing in apparent calm behind the hurrying figures, when her first impulse was to spring forward to meet the new arrival. But she had not long to wait. Some one else had eyes, too, though not such quick ones; and, after the first uncertain glance around at unfamiliar surroundings, something lighted them suddenly with a flash of recognition, and then Althea felt that the blessed sun was shining, and all else was forgotten for the moment.

"Althie! you have come yourself! That is kind."

And with the old dear voice again, Althea's face was lifted like a rose to meet the sunlight, with dewy tenderness about the eyes instead of further greeting; and if the hands clung an instant longer than was necessary in that first clasp, it was the only outward sign.

Surely there never was a less self-possessed person than Althea Holmes; would she ever learn to behave like other people, and remember the exigences of the moment without being reminded?

It was but a moment, certainly, but it was she who ought to have remembered to include her father, and not to have to be recalled by Mr. Valender's glance in his direction.

"I was forgetting Daddy," she said, with a happy little laugh, that came with bubbling softness like a child's. "My father—Mr. Valender."

For Althea *was* happy just then; her sun was shining with meridian clearness under that touch, that glance, so she hardly saw the greeting between the two. And if the organist's bow was more formal and profound than the young man usually met with from his male acquaintance, he took no immediate notice, but turned to give an order to a waiting porter about his valise.

There is a certain unconscious grace of bearing that can no more be assumed where it has not grown, than it can fail of recognition when natural: women generally appreciate this, and it did not escape Althea's notice that there was just that alacrity about these country officials that there had been on the city platforms when Mr. Valender had an order to give. And it did not escape her father either.

"Do you drive?" he asked, suddenly and briskly.

Andrew started involuntarily. The music-master's tone had sounded as if his carriage and pair, at the very least, were waiting the traveller's convenience; and the apparition of the little country omnibus from the Bull, with its meekest and most forlorn-looking of horses, was so surprising, as they turned the corner, that his answer was not so ready as usual.

"A—no; I think not. I will walk," was the hesitating reply.

The whole scene had rendered Althea speechless. What had come over her father? Was it only a joke? For, to her fancy, the hanging head of that spiritless hack was perfect irony after the gusto of the question; and yet there was not the customary twinkle in the speaker's eyes, as if pure fun lurked below. A longing desire to escape the present embarrassment seized her, and, with a half-laughing—

"I think *I* drive," the girl had sprung into the little yellow box before they could detain her, with the dim idea that the two would get on better without her.

But oh! what a relief was Mamsey's face when the jolting affair stopped at last at the well-known door. It seemed to

steady her nerves at once, and to allay the confusion within her; for Mamsey, looking so sweet and natural in her soft lace frill and gauzy scarf, was a perfect home-picture.

There was a glimpse behind her, too, through the open dining-room door, of a picture of another sort, that had borrowed graceful touches from the same hand,—such a refined element as a table can take without the least attempt at display, when pretty china, spotless and plentiful damask, and less plentiful old silver, catch the eye,—and, in the centre of all, an unfamiliar pot of hot-house flowers made Althea's breath come faster.

"Heliotrope!" she cried, with a suppressed gasp; but Edmund's quiet smile betrayed his thought of her in this instance, and he was amply repaid by the radiant glance his sister sent him before taking a deep draught of the delicious perfume. It was a pretty sight altogether; for if Mamsey had decreed, at once, that there should be no late dinners—no attempt at anything out of their reach—that Mr. Valender was coming to see them as they were—in their natural element—still, it would be strange if her table did not reflect herself, and the unpretending elegance of a mind that looked on the sunny side of everything.

But sensible as the mother was in most things, she had her little aberrations, as we have seen, else she would never have told Edmund all about Althea's comparison of the spare room to a "Dutch Interior," while Jack was standing by; for she might have known the boy would not readily forget it. So Althea's whiff of her flowers was cut short by Jack's shouldering the newly-arrived portmanteau, and informing his sister he would take it on before to the "Dutch" quarters; and he looked so impish as he made his way up the "Jacob's ladder" staircase, that Althea was constrained to rush after him, and implore him not to say anything about the nonsense she had let slip.

"Can't promise beforehand," was all the consolation she

could get. "I must wait and see first if the Dutchman is worthy of all the thought expended upon him. Kitty's view is, that 'keeping company' upsets a house till you don't know what end of the week you're in."

"The *Dutchman*, indeed!" cried Althea, too indignant at the allusion to heed Kitty's lamentations; "that is even more senseless than father, when he talks of Lovelace."

"So I should think," returned Jack, mildly, as he deposited his burden at the door. "If coming events cast their shadows before, this is the shadow of a veritable Beau Nash. But hark! Al—the Event has arrived, whatever character he is to assume. Fly off and get rigged out now, and I'll go and bestow my fraternal welcome."

Althea did not wait to hear the end. "Rigged out," indeed! What amount of rigging could do more for her than she had already when, her outer things being thrown aside, she ran lightly down with such a shy radiance in her face, and stood, a slim white vision of uncertainty, upon the drawing-room threshold? Only two people there—that was a blessing. Mamsey and Andrew talking happily together as if they had known each other for years; no dreadful ice to break, no formality to get over—all that done without her, and everything made easy: oh, what a blessing a mother was to such a girl as this!

"We are beginning the second volume at once, you see," was Mamsey's greeting to her daughter. And her smile was so bright that Althea's heart bounded within her as she took the seat Andrew placed for her beside his own. Yet when they all met at table a little later, Mamsey's work seemed only half done after all: talk did not flow naturally, as custom teaches even strangers to converse round an ordinary dinner table—a few small elements of discord congealed what should have been a stream of pleasant chat into lumpy particles, till at length the stream flowed only between the head of the table and the stranger at its side.

It was a pity. Althea should have known better, and have taken her share, instead of giving way to unwise conjectures and wonderings if her world struck strangely on the man at her side. For if he was quieter than usual—feeling his way, as it were—it does not follow that the way was unpleasant by any means. He was learning fast, for one thing; it was curious to him to see the life of which Althea had given him glimpses, being lived now before his eyes; and her idea of his lack of exertion returned with distinctness, when he saw how these grown-up lads supplied the deficiency of table attendance with the ease and quiet of long usage. To anticipate the wants of mother and sister seemed to have been a part of their elementary education, and they required no reminder now; except once indeed, when Jack (who was listening with the eagerness of youth to the conversation of the stranger-guest) was recalled to his duties by the light touch of his mother's hand, when he responded to the hint with an alacrity that made ample amends.

"If we make servitors of our sons, we must forgive their having ears—they do not often forget their duties," said Mamsey, with a loving glance at her boy; covering the involuntary little pause with a laugh, and then taking up the thread just where it had been broken. She had taken the lead in the conversation at first from a sense of necessity, feeling instinctively that there was still a little ice in the stream, and that, if it were to be thawed, she must use her own exertions.

But the sense of duty soon gave place to one of pleasurable enjoyment, and for a while she forgot that her husband was formal and unlike himself to-night, and that Althea was quieter than a girl usually is who sits by her lover's side: old days, old scenes, were thronging back under the influence of her sister's favourite, and the breath he brought with him of a world she had quitted so long ago. So the talk drifted to those two, and stayed there yet awhile; and if Mamsey's eye brightened as she grew more interested, there was an answering enthusiasm in Andrew Valender. Althea marvelled secretly as

she recalled his half-negligent replies to the Wynton sisters; but was, on the whole, content to listen, and to wait her turn.

On the whole—yes. Her head ached a little after the morning's excitement, and it was delicious to have Andrew love her mother. It was nicer far to listen, even though his face remained so long turned from her own that a momentary wonder crossed her mind. And yet, when looking up suddenly, she found her brother Edmund's grave quiet eyes fixed upon herself as if he shared the wonder, Althea resented the look, and was foolish enough to feel as indignant with dear old Ted as if he had openly taxed Mr. Valender with being wanting in affection, when she knew it was all her own fault, for behaving so badly.

It was too bad of Ted. What business had he to judge one who was just everything to her? Althea could half believe he was jealous of the intrusion of a stranger into their home nest. Why must Ted always test and gauge everything and everybody in that old-fashioned way? Jack did not—no indeed! He had forgotten "Beau Nash," and "the Dutchman," and all the rest of the nonsense, and was just taking in ideas at all his pores; gazing at Andrew with that peculiar worship of the schoolboy for one who represents the World to his simple fancy;—the World, with its large capital "W," and its delightful mystery.

Tease as he might, Jack's heart was won, his sister saw, and she was just hesitating whether she should not show Edmund his mistake, by the one slight word that would bring back her lover's thoughts, like his face, to the sense of her presence, when a remark of Mamsey's rendered it unnecessary.

"Althea, child, I am sure Mr. Valender is longing to escape from this hot room and breathe the country air, and you were wanting to introduce him to our river. These golden evenings are too precious to waste. Shall one of the boys bespeak a boat while you get ready?"

It was soon settled, and the little party broke up at once and dispersed. Edmund and his father left the house together; and, while Althea went upstairs to prepare for the river, the mother invited her guest, laughingly, to a stroll round the "estate," advising Althea to be quick and seize the glorious evening before dusk.

It was a glorious evening. The sky was a miracle of beauty; the sun, on its downward march, seemed to be doing all he could for a pair of lovers, and touching the very commonest details with golden shafts of light; lingering too, as if he would say, "Enjoy yourselves, my children. This is a special day, I know; I will make it as long as I can."

Yet they were not in a hurry, these two. The one was lingering over her small preparations with a faint echo of the sigh with which she had flung off the old brocade: the other—down below in the straggling garden, was looking perfectly content by Mamsey's side, and did not cast one impatient glance in Althea's direction.

It would be hard to express just what was in the girl's mind, as she moved deliberately about. The radiance had left her face for the time, but it was not unhappy. Andrew was here—the being she loved best on earth; two seconds would take her into his presence, if she so chose; one slight gesture from that open window would bring his face to seek hers with the smile that had grown so precious: and yet she did not seek either. *Her* love was all ready; though it had sprung up with such rapid growth, it had struck its roots deep into kindly soil. But this other was of a different nature. Only the blade had as yet appeared; it might be that, for a growth so slow, the sun and wind and rain must descend upon it before it would be matured enough to meet hers in any equal degree; and therefore all that remained was to keep her own in check, lest its fair flowers should spread into rank luxuriance.

Nothing clearly of all this, however. The only clear idea amidst all the jumble was, that she would have to wait for

"Althea's sun picture."—*p.* 211.

much besides a home—for the very element that makes a true home at all.

But the pensive face broke into a tender smile at the sight that met her glance down below in the garden, and again she lingered and let the window curtains screen her from view, while the sun made for her a picture she would have in memory for a lifetime.

Louise had had her sun-picture of the little mother in that same garden, earlier in the year. Althea's was touched with even tenderer light, because of the other figure it included.

What *was* Mamsey saying as they strolled up and down, pausing every few minutes, and then resuming their easy pace, while still the theme continued? Andrew surely had never shown to such advantage as now, bending an earnest, almost reverent attention to the companion of his walk.

And Jack on his mother's other side, and on whose arm she leaned, seemed to be devoured with eagerness as he bent before her, now and again, to put in a word.

And once, when one of the rambling gooseberry bushes caught Mamsey's dress in passing, it was Andrew who saw it before Jack, and had released it with an assiduity that would have made Miss Grace marvel. They stood again after that little episode, yet awhile, till at last the mother turned her bright face upward, and waved to the lingerer to hasten; and then Andrew looked at his watch suddenly, and Althea felt it was time she joined them.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE "MAYFLY."

"Joy is the best of wine."

GEORGE ELIOT.

AN odd pair of lovers indeed. Down the quiet streets they went together to the river-side, where their boat had been waiting for them nearly half an hour; down the peaceful stream, past stunted willows, and broad meadows with their flowering banks; where other boats, full of livelier parties or noisier pleasure seekers, passed them occasionally, and where Althea vaguely felt she ought to be very happy, and yet that, somehow happiness was not yet quite ripe.

Was it always so? Those girls, that passed her but now with such interested faces, thought her to be envied, she knew. They saw at a glance that her "story" had come, and for a moment checked their careless laughter, as the boats passed each other on the watery highway. Yet had not her own heart formerly been as blithe as theirs? And now that she was supposed to be perfectly happy, was she not finding painfully that the *im*perfect tense has a knack of getting into most things in this life?

All at once the flow of thought was checked by the boat shooting suddenly into a narrow brooklet, and the surprise brought Althea's eyes at last to the face opposite her own.

"Andrew! was it my fault? Where *are* we going?" she asked, with some alarm.

"You are not much of a steerswoman, I can see," was the amused reply. "But this last swerve was intentional on my part. Don't let go the cord, dear; we will explore this winding creek like two Crusoes. Harington seems to be taking the air like ourselves to-night."

"It will lead us nowhere, however," was Althea's rejoinder. But she got no immediate response this time, for the sculler was too intent on the business of guiding the *Mayfly* safely round sudden bends and between close banks to have words to spare, except directions as to steering.

But the passage narrowed perceptibly, sculling became no longer practicable, and the little boat came to a stand at last on a shallow of luxuriant forget-me-nots, under a canopy of whispering willows.

"I told you it would lead us nowhere," remarked Althea; then, wondering at a freak that seemed more like one of foolish Jack's than her present companion's—"Of course this brook runs from the mill; but I knew no boat could get along there."

"Nevertheless, *Nowhere* is a pleasant place on the whole, don't you think?" replied Mr. Valender. And, standing up, he drew his sculls out of danger, and, passing to where Althea sat, took the place beside her with a contented air of possession.

"On the whole, as I said, there is no place nicer than 'Nowhere,' for just now and again, when taking holiday. What do *you* think, Althie?"

A passing fancy that Aunt Grace would not consider Mr. Valender overworked enough to require such complete abandonment, brought a sudden sparkle to the girl's eyes. She felt herself too much at her companion's mercy in such close neighbourhood, however, to dare to say so just then; so she contented herself with a demure, "I think as you do—*upon the whole.*"

"As if I couldn't see that was only a second thought!"

he cried. "There was something else under that flash of mischief that the long lashes covered so discreetly. They were not quite in time, though. What was it, child?"

"Something that can wait very well till we reach *terra-firma*," was the smiling reply. And then, as Andrew's arm came round her, and he drew her closer to his side, the snow mantle of shyness melted suddenly, as it ever did at a touch of his, and the imperfect tense with all its vague questions was forgotten in an instant.

"Are you happy, Althie?" he asked softly, knowing full well the answer that would come, and that came now with perfect truth; whereas two minutes ago it would have been almost falsehood.

The touch had unsealed her lips, as it always did; and now, as her head nestled softly against his arm, no cradled child looked more blissfully content, as she asked—

"What were you and mother discussing so earnestly, Andrew, that you never noticed the time?"

He moved a little to look the better into her face.

"You don't mean to say you were watching us, and waiting to be called? You *don't* mean that, Althie? And, child, do you know you have been very silent all the evening, and your face as grave as a judge's, the whole time we were rowing down here? Tell me what was under it all."

"That would be very ridiculous, Andrew. But if I puzzle you—sometimes, and perhaps—disappoint you, you must try not to mind it—dear. If I did not love you so well, I dare say I should be easier to understand. Let me speak this once, while I can. When you find me silent and reserved, Andrew, and I seem different, try to trust me always—will you? I think people have to *grow* together; and it takes time for each to understand the other. Do you see at all what I mean?"

"A little bit. I seem to have three different Altheas, though, to learn to understand. But time will teach me, I

have not the smallest doubt. Now, guess who has been in my thoughts all the way down here."

"I couldn't, Andrew"—though the shy light in her eyes looked as if she could, easily.

"Not *you*, dear. Some other woman altogether." (Ah, how her face falls in a moment!) "Well, Althie, it is your mother who has taken me by storm; for, notwithstanding all you told me, I did not imagine her half so lovable. There is a charm about her I never met with in any one before. You don't grudge my saying so, do you? A man sees in the mother of the girl he has chosen a possible picture of his wife, in long after years."

"Ah, if I ever could be like mine!" murmured the girl, letting her cheek rest against his arm once more. "But as to grudging any affection you give to her, or any of my people, Andrew, you know it is the surest bond between us. Now tell me the subject of your discussion."

"That brother of yours was one—that long-legged boy who is thirsting to see life, and thinks I have come from the very vortex of fashion, poor young fellow. Dull office routine would soon sober down the glamour of many of his ideas of a London existence, even if I could put him in the way of it, as I mean to try. My uncle Valender's opposition is like a rock at first, but I have found it crumble before now on many subjects, under judicious pressure."

"But mother surely told you what is the one thing that prevents *our* rock from crumbling," cried Althea. "A rock that has stood in the way of many things besides poor Jack's interests. The boy may be willing and longing for a start, with hope and pluck enough for anything—for all we could see to the contrary, nothing between him and the Woolsack—but the very palpable need of a little money at the outset."

"True enough," answered Andrew. "But it is often the poor who stand by each other, you know; and if you are poor, I am in the same boat (in a double sense, by the way). And

I think I have a little more of that cheap quality called 'brass,' than any of *you*—some people are stouter beggars than others, don't you see? Supposing I should prove the medium between grim Uncle Val and a promising young pupil; that would be pleasanter to look back upon than some of my achievements."

"It is dear of you even to wish it," was the fond reply; "but you know the proverb about beggars and their horses, and I fear the best of wishes or the stoutest of begging won't transform Jack into an articled pupil."

"Not alone, possibly. However, that's a future consideration, and perhaps I am only raising false hopes by hinting such a thing to Jack. But my mind has found ample subject for thought since coming to Harington; and, do you know, Althea, the idea of your mother's being banished all these years from her old home is simply preposterous to me! I came here with the dim notion that I might have to make allowance for—— Oh, it does not matter what; but I certainly did not expect to see—what I *have* seen."

"And yet I told you something about her too, Andrew."

"You certainly did; but then, Althea, those eyes of yours are apt to see many things through a rosy glamour, from mothers and brothers to stage Juliets and old rocking-horses."

"And commonplace young lawyers glorified into heroes. You forget how much glamour was shed over one of *them*," was the quick retort.

"I don't know about that. I have a confused recollection of certain strictures passed upon that same individual in the Elm-leigh shrubberies. Eh, Mrs. Hannah More?"

"Only confused recollections! Then I fear, Mr. Valender, I was sadly wasting valuable time in attempting to point out your faults."

"Women are much given to waste their time on unworthy objects, my dear Miss Holmes. Wasn't it Waller who sang—

"'Go, lovely rose!
Tell her that wastes her time and me,
That now she knows——'"

"I know this," broke in his companion, cutting short the conclusion with a blush that became her well—"that we are sadly wasting time *now*, Mr. Valender."

"Quite a delusion, my dear Althie; you do not think so, any more than I do, though rational discourse is one of your hobbies. Well, we'll have time for that to-morrow. Now shall I tell you what I was going to say about your mother when you interrupted me just now, or wouldn't it be strictly rational enough?"

"I only wish *you* would be rational, Andrew, and keep to the point." And perhaps she took the surest way to make him so, by creeping nearer to him once more, and letting her cheek rest softly against the arm she held.

"Well, then, it is this: If Uncle Val should be too much for me respecting Jack and his articles, I believe I am a match for Miss Felicia, and could carry my point about your mother's going to Elm-leigh. The dear old soul would act the refrigerator for a while, but she has not the heart to sustain a long siege, if I resolved to withdraw the sunlight of my presence altogether, till the day was carried. For the idea of two old people like those, each with a foot in the grave, so to speak, holding out for twenty years against a sister, and *such* a sister, makes my blood boil. It would be a duty to convince them of the error of their ways. And a duty I am resolved on doing, Althea."

She sat musing, without immediate response, till her companion exclaimed—

"Come, Mrs. More! Are not those your sentiments? I thought the word 'duty' would be to your ears what the horn is to an old hunter."

Althea smiled. "Duty is a very difficult word to construe, sometimes," she said. "Don't you think it is generally easier

to teach another than to do our own? And before showing Aunt Felicia hers, we must remember that it is partly mother's own choice to stay away. She was invited to Louise's wedding, you know."

"Then I think it was a mistake not to go," remarked Mr. Valender, promptly.

"Perhaps. But you remember our talk about Mrs. Micawber, and my telling you mother's idea of the subject. She will never go to Elm-leigh without my father; and as the invitation did not include him, she chose to stay at home rather than go where there was no welcome for her husband."

"And yet it is preposterous," Andrew muttered, half petulantly. "Preposterous of the Wyntons, I mean, to cut themselves off from their own flesh and blood, for half a lifetime, in that fashion. Dear me! Elm-leigh is not the world, after all said and done; and even if it were, your father is well enough—I mean to say——"

"Never mind what you mean," put in Althea, quickly, as she caught the embarrassment of his tone. Her head left its shelter as she spoke, and it was with a rising colour that she went on: "Whatever it is, it is hardly a daughter's place to discuss her father's claims. Shall we talk of something else?"

His own cheek caught a momentary glow from hers, but he recovered himself instantly.

"If I begged pardon it would look like a confession of wrong," he responded, in his old bright fashion. "Whereas I think it is some one else who should beg pardon, for a certain touchiness I shall have to correct some day; for, if I mistake not, it is one of her youthful failings. I remember being nearly sent about my business at Elm-leigh, just after a modest confession; and your tone and manner just now were only a polite way of telling me to mind my own affairs."

"And I have my own ideas about the modesty of the confession, Mr. Valender."

"And I have mine about what are my own affairs, my dear

young lady! If no one else in Castle Street is to be considered my business, no one can deny that you, at least, are an obvious part of it. And, apropos of business, I will take your advice, and mind it this very moment."

He opened his pocket-book as he spoke, with a sly glance at her from the grey eyes, as his long fingers leisurely turned over the contents. Althea caught sight of a bit of familiar-looking handwriting lying beside a few visiting cards, and it brought a pleased smile into her face.

"Andrew, do I know that hand?" she asked, the conscious smile still dimpling the faint rose colour of her cheeks; for she recognized at a glance the letter that had taken her so long to write, and she hardly expected it to be treasured in this way.

He held up the thin packet before her eyes, with a little laugh. "Ah! that reminds me," he said, mischievously; "here it is—the first letter I ever had from your pen. But, Althea, what became of the other two? You wrote two others, you know, before deciding to send this."

There was a moment's pause before she answered, demurely, "It seems you and my mother had still other subjects under discussion in the garden. I wonder at Mamsey! But since you ask, Mr. Andrew Valender, the two others found a speedy way to the flames, I am thankful to say, where I half wish the third had followed. Might I be so bold as to ask if *that* one meets your highness's approval?"

"On the whole, yes, seeing I know the writer a little better than she gave me credit for doing. Otherwise I might have fancied a Puritan maiden had rounded those quiet sentences. All the same, I like it; I love it: it is like a prelude to a harmony—an under-current of sweetness that will grow more distinct by and by."

Althea's lips parted, but she did not speak the word that rose unbidden. One of those sudden changes passed over her face, blotting out all the mischief, and leaving it true and

tender as the woman-nature of which it was the outward index. It was one of those moments of perfect happiness that are so rare in this world. Yet she dimly felt, even then, that the prelude was not finished, that the under-current was what Andrew could best appreciate yet awhile.

Meanwhile Mr. Valender was intently minding his business, and now drew forth the thread he had stolen from Althea's work-basket before setting out, and began busily knotting a tiny silken noose.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked, looking up at length.

"Certainly! Some of my embroidery silk! What about it, Andrew?"

"Give me your hand, child. This is to make a Mrs. Micawber of you some day, or a Juliet, or whatever else you prefer. I bind you with a silken thread to-night until a stronger one can be found, you know. Let us be quite sure about the measure. That's it. Now"—as he carefully returned the little thread to its place, and put up the pocket-book once more—"I wonder if you change your mind about this brook leading nowhere! It seems to me it has led us to a very definite Somewhere I had in view the whole time."

"Then it is high time it took us back again into the stream of humanity," was the prompt rejoinder. "Come, Andrew, it is getting late; pray take the sculls, and let us be going."

"Not till I have some forget-me-nots, though. It would be base to leave such treasures all behind. And as to being late, I have had proof *you* do not mind being out late at night. Do you think I forget your following me to the shrubbery, and staying out with me till midnight, at Elm-leigh?"

"Andrew, it is insufferable! I have a great mind to spring out this minute, and leave you to your own company. Be quick with your flowers, or I really will. Midnight, indeed!"

"That's right. I know exactly how to transform my 'ooseberry picker into a veritable Spit-fire. Don't be vexed, Althie; it is just these changes that make you so lovable: so you must not be surprised at my taking advantage now and then. No wonder your mother calls you her 'one luxury.'"

"Does she call me so?" asked Althea, softly.

"Yes. 'We sometimes thought,' she said, 'that we ought not to prevent her going out to win her way for herself after she left school, but could never face the sacrifice. So we have kept our girl for our one luxury, to make home fresh and bright for her brothers and ourselves.'"

"Do you think they were right, Andrew?"

"My dear, when people fish for compliments they never get them, at *my* hands. No; I think they made quite a mistake. If they had sent you out into the world, it would have brushed off those oddities of yours: you would have learned to speak your mind without hesitation; to receive remarks without that deliciously changing colour; to enjoy the theatre in polite, decorous fashion; to avoid ecstasies of any sort; to eschew rocking-horses, as childish; to write love-letters without wasting three times the amount of time and paper you should. In short, it would have saved me endless trouble with your education. But still I think I'll keep my 'ooseberry picker, and hope she'll repay my pains."

He had been rapidly cutting away wet stalks all the while, and making up masses of the tender river blossoms, disposing them about Althea's dress with his critical artist eye; but he did not seem quite satisfied.

"It is too much like the unfortunate bridesmaid's gear," laughed his companion; "and I am not going to be like poor mad Ophelia, decked out in straws. Besides, I object to wearing forget-me-nots; it is against my principles."

"And yet you are always wearing them! Yes—you may look surprised, but however unconsciously, your face speaks, as it were, a whole garland of them. What else do you

suppose made me act against *my* principles, and salute you as I did when we parted at Paddington?"

Althea measured the distance between the boat and the shore with a quick glance, but seeing how slippery the bank looked, turned resignedly to her friend.

"I think, Mr. Valender, if you have enough flowers, we will be setting off homewards; my mother will be growing anxious, and the evening really gets chill."

So he roused himself at last from his luxuriating attitude, and gathered up his sculls for departure; yet stood listening a moment ere applying himself to his task, looking down, half fondly, half amused at the figure before him, with its shower of forget-me-not blossoms.

"Hark, Althea, to the stillness! I can hear the little brook brawling at the mill, now, as I could not when we first came. What do they tell us it is always saying—

> "'Men may come, and men may go,
> But I go on for ever.'

What a fiction that is! I believe you are thinking so, at this minute."

"The country air has made you too profound for me, Andrew; you speak in riddles half the time."

"Not, surely, when I ask you why you are *not* like the brook, if it speaks truth? I know perfectly well you can guess that."

He was not prepared for the sudden spring that his absence from her side made practicable now, and in a moment she was clinging to the slippery bank, and the next, with exultant laughter, skimming past him round the neighbouring bend.

"Why am I like the brook, Mr. Valender?" came the voice, merry and taunting as a schoolgirl's, as she watched his difficulties in the exceedingly narrow stream. "I'm afraid you are not much of a steersman. But guess my riddle—why the brook and I are just alike—

"'Men may come and men may go,
And men may scull and men may row,
But *we* go on for ever. Yes, that we do!'"

And so they did. The narrow, broken pathway was easy enough to those nimble feet, and nothing would tempt her back into the boat again, though Andrew pleaded hard. She took care not to go far ahead, in case of any real difficulties in the boat's passage; but, though Andrew always caught glimpses of a fluttering dress when he rounded a point, or heard snatches of low sweet song, he had a lonely pull the rest of the way. But Althea was happy as she tripped lightly along the meadow pathways in the deepening dusk; so restfully happy once again—the harmony growing distinct after the discords—that the child-element had room to rise to the surface, as in the days before she and Mr. Valender had met.

Only once did she steady her dancing footsteps to becoming gravity, at sight of staid Mr. Thorpe taking the air, when an awkward sense of the lateness of her apparent solitude made her bow very demure, as she lingered near the advancing boat.

"Another escapade!" she thought. "Mr. Thorpe will give me up as incorrigible. He will never want me for the Sunday school. This is worse than the hurdles!"

But the landing-stage was reached, and the Vicar was forgotten as she sprang to welcome the *Mayfly* and its solitary occupant; and if Althea was punished as she deserved for her freak, the two looked happier far as they trod their homeward way than when they had first set out. It was the Andrew of Elm-leigh again; and the bright girl clinging to his arm in the churchyard path thought the dim elms of the avenue looked down upon them just like the old elms of the far-off shrubbery, where the story of her life had begun.

There was just one check in the gladness when, as they passed the church, the deep tones of the organ suddenly struck on their ears, and made Mr. Valender pause.

"Heigho!" he observed, "there is some one putting on the steam in good earnest—to make up for lost time, I suppose, if he is beginning at such an hour as this."

"It is daddy," said Althea, softly; and Andrew could not help a little start of surprise, for he had forgotten all about the organist.

"It is late to begin, is it not?" he asked, recovering himself speedily. "I suppose he is preparing for to-morrow."

"Oh, he has begun a long time," was the answer. "It is not practice-night, but I dare say it was a music-lesson first, and then enjoyment after. My father never knows when to leave off when he sits down before his organ."

"We'll go and fetch him home, then. Come, child." And, with his hand upon her arm, they turned and passed together into the dim shadowy church, where the sound of their footsteps only drew on them a careless glance for the moment, for the "professor" was far too deeply engrossed to think of anything but the "Quando Corpus," till the concluding bars were reached.

He was himself once more—in his own natural atmosphere, and turned as easy and bright a face to greet the new-comer as if he were one of his own lads. All the foolish dread of cringing had passed out of his mind under the influence of his beloved art; and Andrew saw in him, for the first time, that attractive something that had once won a young girl's love.

"We have been enjoying 'Stabat Mater,'" he said, leaving Althea in one of the shadowy seats, and going up to lay a friendly hand on her father's shoulder. "I have heard Rossini at Palace recitals and elsewhere, but it never sounds better, to my mind, than in some dim old church like this. Now for 'Cujus Animam,' if you are not tired."

Tired! Not he. "Now, boy,"—gleefully, to poor long-suffering Tim. And he was soon in the rapt enjoyment such natures feel under the inspiring influence of sympathy.

as he turned page after page, and Andrew, leaning from his chancel stall to follow the lines, joined in occasionally with his tuneful tenor, the two were a pleasant sight for the other pair of eyes.

"I think mother will expect us now, Daddy," said Althea at length, drawing nearer to the little focus of light; at which Tim Truman sighed with relief.

"We must have the final chorus though," was the reluctant answer. And Mr. Valender, seeing the boy's despair and Althea's pity, good-naturedly took the post of blower himself. As for Althea, she could not tell whether to wonder most at her cool, careless friend in his different characters, or at the natural way in which the organist accepted so unusual a service from "Lovelace."

Tim left the church that night with such a coin as he rarely received for his services; and as his master rose and closed the organ, he too was as happy as a king, and never less troubled by self-consciousness than when he stood crushing his wideawake under his arm, waiting for his companions to pass out before he turned off the gas.

He came bustling after them the next minute, and, with the same radiant face, linked his arm in that of his new friend; the touch of sympathy just now had broken down all Roy's proud reserve, and set him on his proper footing.

"I begin to see where Althea gets her enthusiasm," Andrew remarked, looking into her father's sunny eyes, with a pleasant smile.

The organist laughed. "You must not set me off on my hobby, or you will have too much of it," was his reply. "My young folks tell me I ride it to death, and there may be some truth in it, for solitary riding is poor work for the lookers-on."

"I don't know about that altogether," rejoined his guest, with an odd smile at the girl on his other side. "I have lighted on a solitary rider before now, whose enthusiasm kindled my own when the first astonishment was over."

"And ended by taking you with him?" asked the organist, eagerly, unconscious of the literalness of the "riding" allusion. And, not waiting for the reply, he added, "Ah, that's the blessing of enthusiasm! Ride your hobby alone, and you are a bore to your fellows; but once get another to ride with you—there would be no limit to your horizon *then*. Your Pegasus would be like Ianthe's car."

"My solitary equestrienne did not take me with her, however," said Mr. Valender, with a dry smile. "For one thing, there would not have been room, I fear. And, for another, I suppose I lacked the necessary sympathy. Anyway, the mere sight of me broke the spell that held the rider to her hobby, and the illusion vanished."

"You threw cold water upon it, eh? But, my dear sir, I think that was a mistake. The world is not so rich in good, that we can afford to lose our innocent illusions; and I always think the wiseacres who outlive their youthful dreams, and end by laughing at them, are under the worse delusion of the two. And the same with hobbies. Every man would be the better for having one of some sort. Believe me—while my rich and prosperous neighbours are pitying me, and calling me 'poor Holmes' and 'the poor mad musician' (for all I know or care), they little think I am pitying *them* for crawling in the dust while I am riding like a prince on the wings of my art."

The "professor" stopped short here with a laugh that was half ashamed, but the involuntary pressure of the arm that was still linked in that of his friend, reassured him; while Althea, glancing furtively up into the face just above her own, saw the same softened expression it had worn when she had painted her artless home-pictures at Elm-leigh.

"Talking shop, you see," said the elder man, deprecatingly. "I told you how it would be, if you set me off. But, Mr. Valender, bear with me this once, and let a man who has lived half a century be believed, when he tells you that

enthusiasm is a *good*, and not a folly to be laughed down. I know it is the fashion nowadays, with some people, not to be surprised or delighted with anything; but it is a poor fashion—a pitiful mistake. Better be in earnest over trifles than never know what earnestness is. If a divine art have inspired your enthusiasm, then I say you have small chance of missing a happy life, even if you have to wear a rusty coat to the end of your days. Failure indeed!" he cried, interrupting himself in disdain; "is everything a failure that does not fetch its proper price in the world's market? Does it follow that a poor fellow like myself is a failure, because I have fallen infinitely short of the height I hoped to reach? Enough for me that my feet are on the lower rounds of the ladder, and that the top reaches heaven itself, where the ledgers of the rich have no place."

Their positions were strangely reversed for the moment. It was Lovelace who looked thoughtful, almost to despondency, and replied, with something half appealing in his tone—

"You do not need to urge upon me the beauty of enthusiasm. I have begun to see it plainly—of late. But when a man wakes up to find it is something left altogether out of his composition——"

But here the "professor" cut him short in his cheery way.

"Not left out, my friend," he remarked. "It is a dormant faculty, possibly; but who knows how much of it *I* should have retained so long, but for a certain sunbeam that crossed my path, long ago? And as for this other Althea here, her daughter—though she is but a middling copy of the original, you won't be in her neighbourhood long without having all your dormant energies thoroughly awakened. If such a madcap was ever brought up in a quiet respectable family——"

But the arrival at that same quiet respectable door prevented the sequel, for Jack rushed out upon them to know the cause of their prolonged absence, and held his sister forcibly by the wrist, till the coast was clear.

"Has he told you?" he asked in an excited whisper.

"Has who told me what?" was the counter question. "Why, Jack, your eye is big with mystic meaning—it holds me like the Ancient Mariner's did the wedding guest."

"Pish!" muttered the lad, impatiently; "we are not all so full of weddings and wedding guests as some people. It is business I tell you—wonderful business. The Dutchman is safely gone to his 'Interior'—you needn't be afraid. Hasn't he told you anything?"

"I see," answered his sister, with a great clearing of her intelligence. "The supremely important affair is that of your possible articles. All very well to talk about the '*Dutchman*' behind his back, but it strikes me he is something very different in your heart of hearts. Don't set your mind too much upon the chance of a profession, though, dear Jack; the disappointment is always greater if one is too sanguine."

"All very fine, Miss Wisdom! Don't set *your* mind too much on the chance of a wedding, then—come!"

"I don't, Jack. Mother thinks I don't so much as I should," was the answer; and Althea's face, like her tone, had grown suddenly subdued.

Her brother gazed at her a moment, and the remembrance of her grief over the letter he had concealed returned to his mind.

"I tell you what it is, Al," he said, decidedly; "if you are going to croak like that, I shall take Lovelace's part through thick and thin. It's all those Elm-leigh women that have put notions into your head—you've been like a veritable raven since you came back. But here comes Beau Nash," he added, breaking off with lowered voice—"he'll teach you better."

"What's the subject of discourse?" asked the unconscious guest, coming in upon the brother and sister at the sound of voices.

A sudden flash like a sunray crossed the shadow of Althea's brow. "I am a little puzzled as to my own identity, Andrew;

that is all. When, in the space of one short hour, my father calls me a 'madcap,' my brother a 'raven,' and my friend a 'spitfire,' it is difficult to adjust one's ideas."

"Not at all," was the prompt reply. "We might make the list much longer than that, and yet be true to the original. I told you I had three Altheas to get to understand; but I fell far short of the mark, when I said three."

"Yes. Few of us guess all the names by which we are known to our friends," rejoined Althea, with a sly look in Jack's direction, as she went off upstairs.

CHAPTER XVII.

WOMEN'S PROBLEMS.

"Some set out, like Crusaders of old, with a glorious equipment of hope and enthusiasm; and get broken by the way, wanting patience with each other and the world."—*Middlemarch.*

LIFE had scarcely time to settle down in the little Castle Street home, after Mr. Valender's departure, before another excitement came to disturb its accustomed tranquillity; Louise and her husband were come to bid Harington farewell before leaving England.

Sunshine and shadow generally alternate very quickly at such times as these, and the little circle, thus reunited for a brief space in the home nest, found it no exception to the rule. There were plenty of "quips and cranks," of course; it would hardly have been home without these small squibs, that kept the Castle Street air from growing drowsy: on the other hand, there was a constant feeling beneath the surface that *inevitable change*, which touches all households sooner or later, had laid its finger upon this one, and that the first break in the arc was already made.

Yet sunshine prevailed for the most part, and to one at least of the circle, when looking back from under darker skies, that brief week stood out as one of cloudless brightness and ineffable repose. It was not actually so, of course, while it was present; but as distance softens the ruder features of a landscape, so does time veil the small crosses of daily life, and

throw its brighter features into higher relief when seen against a background of cloud.

But Althea had a small ache of her own, even then. She had half dreaded meeting Louise and Daisy's brother, lest any feeling might linger in their minds of possible wrong to Daisy; especially as the sisters-in-law had been much together, of late, both at Elm-leigh and in Frank's early home.

Whatever possible disappointment they might share in private, however, they were far too generous to betray to the woman of Andrew's choice. Frank was ready with his congratulations in his own kindly way, and the only trace of surprise he evinced was once when, talking over past days and meetings in the Surrey home, he broke off to exclaim, half under his breath—

"And who would have thought you and my old friend Val would ever have taken a fancy to each other!"

"Why? Are we so ill assorted, do you think?" asked Althea, quickly; and it was not touchiness, in this instance—only the old sensitive self-probing, that inspired the question.

"Nay—I do not go so far as to say that——" Frank was beginning. But Louise felt instinctively that he was on dangerous ground, and hastened to the rescue, in her quick-sighted way—

"If lookers-on see most of the game in ordinary things, this is one of the exceptions," she said, brightly. "And quite right, too: the game is trying enough at the time—isn't it, Al?—without having a set of spectators to watch every move on the chess-board."

And summoning her husband to hold a skein for her, the little lady contrived to convey such meaning in a light pressure of her foot upon his own, that Mr. Conway, after an inaudible murmur of "Checkmated," prudently abandoned the field.

That same little lady was rather exercised in her mind about the recent engagement, for what would otherwise have been pure joy on Althea's account, was dashed by a slight uncertainty as to the fitness of the choice. She certainly knew

very little of her husband's friend, and any interest in him she might have felt had been on Daisy's account, and now Louise's womanly heart was touched for Daisy, in the present turn of affairs. She could not forget little half-confidences, such as women sometimes make to each other; and though she was too loyal to hint such things, even to her husband, and locked them as safely in her own bosom as Daisy herself, they returned to vex her sometimes, and to make her wonder whether, after all, Andrew had made the wisest choice.

But, as I said, sunshine was in the ascendant; not brilliant sunshine, but tempered by tender, brooding cloudlets. Louise had wept out upon her adopted mother's bosom the last drops of pain her temporary disloyalty had caused her; and in the sweet and entire re-union, the two natures seemed to have grown even closer together, since the one had tasted repentance and the other forgiveness. Louise could never do enough for her uncle Roy either, in these last days; and whatever former friends rallied round the happy bride, not one of them was allowed to hinder her from carrying out any plan for him: even Frank was put off if he claimed his wife's attention at such a time, and Louise's character seemed to have acquired a new grace since she had known the humility of penitence and self-upbraiding.

She had sadly wanted her cousin Arthur to be of the home-party, just then, so that the family might be complete; Arthur had been the one of the boys, in youthful days, to be most with her. Even now, though he was not able to join them at Harington, Louise was in hopes they might have a few hours together, before starting to her new life, especially as he did not yet know her husband.

But if, with friends' farewell visits, business arrangements with Frank, loving talks and plans with the mother, and thoughtful offices for each and all of her dear ones—Mrs. Conway found little time to spare, as the days went all too quickly by, Althea found quite a fresh interest in her cousins,

"You want me, dear?"—*p.* 233.

nowadays, apart from that of affection. Were they not standing just where she was hoping to stand by-and-by? Had they not just entered upon what the mother had called the true testing time? The beginning of the life that would have to show, at its close, whether they had fulfilled, or failed to fulfil, its great end—

> "Then draw we nearer, day by day,
> Each to the other—both to God."

That was not the literal rendering of the words, Althea knew, but they flashed into her mind as a true marriage test, in one of her day-dreams at this time. And listening to their inward voice, her outward ears failed to take in some of the cheerful home-gossip, as the mother and daughters sat under the nut trees one warm afternoon, when the house was deserted by all but Frank, busy with his correspondence within.

He appeared now, and checked the ripple of talk by coming behind his wife's chair, and resting his hands upon her shoulders, with some remark to Mrs. Holmes about the heat. And Althea saw how Louise's work slipped from her fingers, as her hands went up instinctively to meet those other hands, and draw them caressingly about her neck.

"You want me, dear?" Louise asked, looking up at him as he still lingered behind her chair.

"I do not like to say I do, and interrupt pleasant discourse," was the reply; "but if you could spare me ten minutes——" Of course Louise rose at once with a promise of speedy return. And good-natured Frank, with another apology to the others for the intrusion, went off satisfied, throwing his large cambric handkerchief over his wife's head to shield it from the sunbeams, as they trod the straggling pathway together.

Althea's work had fallen too: something more interesting than gathers and gussets was occupying her mind just then; and her face betrayed what Miss Wynton had called the "brown study."

"May I come in?" playfully asked the voice beside her; for

the mother had caught a trick from Edmund of appealing thus, when Althea had withdrawn into a world of her own. She came out of it instantly now, and her arm stole, in the old caressing fashion, round her mother's waist, as she asked suddenly—

"Mamsey, what about those two? Have they rushed at one side of the square, like you? They have certainly not tormented themselves with doubts and fears, as I have."

"Perhaps theirs is the golden mean that wise men tell us is the better way," was the reply. "But you know, Al, I do not look at marriage as the goal, like so many people; it is, in my opinion, rather a point of departure on a new career, with endless degrees of success or failure in the travelling. And the chances of success depend very much, not on the moment of choice, so to speak, but on the long years from infancy and childhood during which the character has been slowly forming."

"But infants and children are not thinking of marriage, mother, or of forming their characters," cried Althea, incredulously.

"Did I say they were, goosie? But many an end is attained by unconscious steps. I don't think you ponder much on how the principles of digestion are being carried on after a meal; but digestion goes on notwithstanding, if you don't violate her functions. Step by step, in most things, Al. Life's journey, for instance, is not a great leap, but a succession of steps—so small that they seem trivial, possibly, but all tending to a definite end, if we only knew it."

"There, I differ again, my most sage of mothers. Does any mortal, however well intentioned, keep one beaten track of right, any more than his neighbour keeps the definite path of evil? Saints and villains—sheep and goats—are not so distinct in this life; it seems to me the paths overlap each other in endless complexity."

"I want Edmund to help me out," said Mrs. Holmes, laughing, "for you won't give me my proper chance. He would tell you that a definite path and a definite end are not quite the

same thing. Who knows better than I, what false steps mean, and overlapping paths? But there must be a balance, child—a proportion: it is the tending *on the whole* that leads imperceptibly, but really, to a destination."

Althea's face was very meditative for some time after this; and it was evident that gussets were as far from her mind as if such things had never entered the inventive brain of foreseeing seamstresses.

"Granted it is so, Mamsey," she said at last, "but does that clear the way? If life is responsible at the best, it seems to me marriage is an added responsibility. Look here, little mother: —say, for the sake of argument (*only*, of course, for the sake of argument), that one consenting person has that within him, or her, that, according to you, gives the promise of success. And that the other (still purely for argument's sake) may seem to lack some things that—say, that a happier combination of circumstances might have developed. (Try and understand all this muddle, mother.) Well then, what about the chances of success for such a pair, is what I want to know."

"My dear," said Mrs. Holmes, quietly laying aside Althea's flimsy disguise, "if I had not faith in Andrew Valender, do you think I would have consented to give you to him? 'Developed' was a good expression to use just now; we don't come into the world like blank sheets of paper, or empty plots of ground, to be filled at pleasure; whatever growth may have been hindered in his case, from want of genial influence, I feel convinced there are the seeds of truth and good in him. You will help each other, child, for you have both something to learn; and sunshine will do much for those seeds I spoke of."

Althea looked relieved, but not entirely satisfied. She was thinking how Andrew jested, and called her "Mrs. Hannah" when she advanced an opinion; and though a smile rose involuntarily at the thought, a half-sigh came with the question—

"Do you think I am just as much to Andrew as Louise is to her husband?"

"Now you have given me a puzzle to solve, in all conscience," was the mother's rejoinder. "But as we are on the marriage subject, Al—quite by ourselves—does it not strike you as strange to think that, of all the millions of marriages that are made, no two are ever alike even at the very beginning? Every man and every woman joining hands, seems not a mere individual but a compound of past generations, formed and forming into main characteristics indeed, but with traits of character besides, for which they cannot account even to themselves. So that no one, even after a perfectly successful wedded life, could really help another beforehand, except in generalities; it is a problem that each must solve for himself or herself. Not, of course, that the young couple think of it as a problem, any more than children think of their characters, but I suppose the working out is going on all the time."

"You are backing out of my question, mother. Suppose I put it a little differently, and ask for your candid opinion of Frank and Andrew."

"Candidly, then, I can find no pleasant adjectives good enough for Frank Conway; kindly, good-hearted, frank, amiable, gentle, manly—he is all these and much more. I think he and Louise will find their true love run all the more smoothly because of the very absence of passion and intensity in both natures. If you ask me, do I think him a good man, I say yes; if a strong one—no."

"I certainly could never imagine Frank treating Louise just as Andrew has treated me, occasionally," remarked Althea reflectively; "but I fear *he* lacks strength and intensity, as much as Frank. I hope you have not used up all your good adjectives though, mother."

"My dear, I told you, some time ago, that ready-made heroes were scarce, and your friend seems to me no exception

to the rule, so far. But if I think I see in Andrew Valender the making of something deeper than the other, you need not despair if your course is more chequered than theirs. It is almost sure to be that: he is of more difficult material; and *you*—well, you don't take life too easily at the best of times. Still, I am hopeful for you."

"Even if far too much of the love is on my side, as yet?" asked the girl, in a half whisper, with a visible tremor of the lips.

"Do not take that for granted," responded the mother, decidedly. "If it is one man's nature to betray his feelings, and another's to conceal them, it is no argument in either case that love is wanting. What made Mr. Valender choose you, do you think, Althea? Not wealth, most certainly; nor influential or social position; hardly, even, beauty," she added, hesitating.

"No, certainly none of these. Andrew has told me to my face, before now, that I am far from handsome," said Althea, with an amused laugh. "But just because he is so much to me, I suppose, I question the oftener if he is not capable of more and better than he gives to me: I mean—if he is not making an unconscious mistake in choosing me."

"How different people are!" mused Mamsey, with a little sigh. "In all the difficulties of my life I don't think that question has ever troubled me. But, Althea—don't spoil life by pulling up your flowers to see if they are growing. Some are longer on the way than others, but *let them grow*, for love and patience seldom fail of their reward. And I think almost all the riddles and questions of this life are solved sooner or later by that one word, 'Love.'"

"Only the first part of the charade," put in a voice at this point, as the organist came from behind the nut-trees at the sound of the last word; "our madcap there would tell you another syllable was wanted, and that everything in life begins and ends in Lovelace! No wonder you never heard me coming! But, my dear," he added, "Louise is having quite a reception, and she begged me to fetch you in to join her.

I just met Frank on his way to post, and came in to find the drawing-room full, and Kitty penning herself into corners, in her efforts to seat the visitors. Don't *you* go, Al—you will only make her labyrinth more complete. Come with me to choose a good family boat for our evening's row, as I promised Jack to bespeak it early. Harington will say it is high jinks in Castle Street, just now."

But whatever Harington did or not say, the small festivities came to an end all too soon; and the family group that assembled at the station three days later, to bid the travellers 'God speed,' found those waiting minutes so full beneath the surface, that, as often happens, only the lightest words could struggle to expression. Louise found herself holding her foster-mother's hand tightly all the while, even as she answered hurried questions and responded to the forced cheerfulness of the others; but when the last moment had come, and the last clinging kiss that had been saved for Mamsey had been gently cut short by Frank's almost lifting his wife into the carriage, no one saw in the confusion how grey the mother's face had gradually become. But the train was not out of sight when she turned with faltering steps towards the waiting-room, with the instinct of a wounded creature to creep away and hide its agony. It was not only the slight frame that was contracted with mortal anguish, but the brave spirit within it was smitten down for the moment, at the sure foreknowledge that she had looked her last on the face of her adopted child.

"Keep them all away for two minutes, Al," she murmured hoarsely, closing the door upon Althea's beseeching face —for even the presence of her loved ones was impossible, just then. "Surely the bitterness of death is past," was the thought that came to her as she sat bowed in pain and grief, those first bewildering moments after the parting; for when Louise was speaking through her tears cheering, hopeful words of the future, the mother was silently taking her earthly leave of the first child-face that had come to bless her home.

"It is better so," she said to herself, as the sharpest of the throes died away; "I could never bear many partings. It is easier to be the first to leave. But for their sakes, I will try to live. I will certainly get advice to-morrow." And then a sudden rain of tears came to relieve the past tension, and husband and children, when they found her thus, knew nothing of the thought that had been stamping itself indelibly on that tender heart—"In every parting there is an image of death."

Late that evening, when the little household had dispersed to its rest in soberer fashion than was wont, Mamsey went to the "state apartment," and fetched her picture of the "Good Shepherd," to hang once more in its old place, and set her lamp beneath it till Roy came up from his book. She wanted it to-night; and its silent ministry must have helped to make the sleeping face of his home-angel so peaceful; for, when an hour later Roy sought his couch, although the lips were a little pinched and blue, every feature seemed, in its unconscious repose, to express what the mother had said to herself so short a time before, "Somehow, I can never feel afraid."

CHAPTER XVIII.

WAYS AND MEANS.

"He brings forth precious jewels to adorn her."
LONGFELLOW.

RAT-A-TAT-TAT-TAT.

Did ever a postman's knock awake the Castle Street echoes like that before?

So questioned Althea, as she bustled across the little hall next morning, on the "trivial round;" but perhaps that was because her ear was so close to the resounding knocker. Turning to answer the summons, she received, with what coolness she could command, a small, suspicious-looking registered packet, though she would have given much not to have answered that knock in person, when she saw what had arrived.

And coming into the empty breakfast-room, all unconscious of the sweet June roses that had leaped into blossom in her cheeks, Althea reflected that she would keep that morsel of a box for private opening, later on. The resolution held good for one minute; the next, finding that she was earlier than usual, the seals were broken, and the morning sunbeams met a sudden flash, such as had never been seen in that modest room before, and the June roses gave place instantly to glowing carnations.

They were in full bloom still, and the eyes above them seemed to have borrowed some of the morning dew, when the

other members of the family began to arrive; and Althea was soon standing, the centre of an eager group, with a half-conscious feeling that some of the radiance of the gems had passed into her being, and that life would never again mean a commonplace homely round of duty.

The "professor" gave a prolonged whistle. "*Diamonds!*" he ejaculated, bringing his hand down upon her shoulder, and looking hard at his tall girl a moment, as the mother-bird might have done when her ugly duckling flew off among the swans.

"Are they diamonds?" was the low, half-awed reply.

The father broke into a little laugh. "Was there ever such an unsophisticated being?" he cried. "No wonder we forget you have arrived at years of discretion, and treat you like a child. '*Are* they diamonds?' indeed! Are you a little ignorant simpleton? That is more like the question of the moment. Did you think they were paste?"

Althea was not to be jeered at, however, at such a time as that, though a painful sense of her own peculiarities returned with her father's words. Some vague idea of crystals had flashed through her mind, but she prudently kept this to herself, and flashed upon her rebuker with her old spirit.

"If I *am* ignorant," she said, "a very brief apprenticeship to a jeweller would soon make me more expert. But it certainly was like a simpleton to be more occupied with the giver than the gift."

"Well done, Spitfire!" roared Jack. "There, daddy, don't play with hot coals unless you expect to be burned. I have learned wisdom by past experience."

There was a general laugh at this; but the music-master was not to be thus silenced, in spite of the sounding blow on the back with which his favourite enforced his advice.

"It is being even more of a simpleton," he began, with some warmth, "to fire up without a spark of provocation. Were you the only one, think you, Althea, not so dazzled by a bauble as to have some thought of whence it came? Of

course you were thinking of the giver, but so was I as well. And perhaps with a little more common sense than either of you—reflecting that a poor man who begins by flinging away a twenty-pound note on a trinket, can't have much thought for the future, and such trifles as tables and chairs."

That was certainly a sobering remark, and the "professor" felt he had the best of it, but the next moment wished the words unsaid, as he saw the shadow that fell on the girl's bright face.

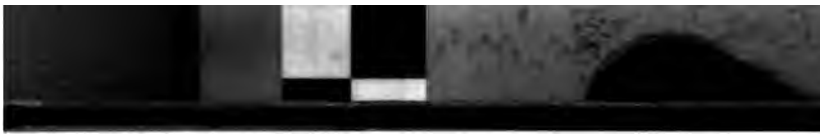
Jack recovered himself first. "It is like the royal game of Punch and Judy," he said: "Punch makes a good stroke, but is knocked over, quick as lightning; then, before our applause is over, it is Judy's turn to succumb. Come, Judy, up and at it again! Turn the tables on him as you did before. Never say die!"

She did say it though, if not in so many words. For Althea had abandoned the fray as suddenly as she had entered it, and her wistful face showed that mornings beginning in effulgent sunlight may possibly wear into grey.

The mother saw the look, and came to the rescue with her usual promptitude.

"Never mind tables and chairs just at present," she said. "I dare say it is all right. Let me see your ring, child. It is a beauty, certainly. And even if it did cost more than was necessary, it is a special present; after all, one would rather see a man err on that extreme than the other at a time like this."

"Yes," put in Althea, eagerly, as if speech had become easier once more. "Because, you see, he won't be always making presents—he knows I should not like it; and if this cost so much more than I realized, I can't help being half glad, because it shows me—— Besides, I don't think Andrew could help buying the best of its kind. I can never associate him with anything cheap. It is one of his maxims that good things pay their own way."



"One can certainly hardly imagine Lovelace and Brummagem jewellery together," observed Jack, thoughtfully.

"This is perfect nonsense," cried the music-master, with a return of his former warmth. "You children have not a grain of common sense amongst you! What I maintain is—that a quarter of the sum spent on those magnificent stones would have been ample for the purpose, and would have left more for the necessaries of life. Sticks and straws before baubles, in my poor opinion."

"Common sense is a fearful thing," remarked Jack the Irrepressible. "I am sure Al is thinking so, as her rosy visions flee, shuddering before its stern front."

And Mamsey laid a light hand on her husband's shoulder, and whispered playfully—

"We must not forget our own youthful follies, Roy. Miss Horton would have told me I had not chosen the most prudent and discreet of lovers myself. But all this time the tea is getting cold," she added aloud, "so I will move an adjournment without further debate, and only propose the question of supplies."

"But what keeps our orator so silent?" asked Jack, turning suddenly round upon his brother. "Our debating society has often found him eloquent enough; will he not give us the benefit of his advice on this question of ways and means?"

"Begin breakfast without waiting then," replied Edmund, with his quiet smile, as he left the room, and returned with a little old-fashioned brown volume, that he spread open upon the table-cloth. "While you proceed I will give you Goethe's opinion (or rather that of his unfortunate *Werter*) on this same question of present-making—it will be worth more than my own: 'Say what you will of rules, they alter the true features and the natural expression. You will tell me that they only lop off the superfluous branches, and prevent the extravagant. Let us compare talents to love. Let us suppose a young man attached to a young woman, dedicating to her

every hour of the day, wearing his health, lavishing his fortune, to convince her he is entirely devoted to her. Then comes a man of cold and correct understanding, and this very respectable person says to him, "My young friend, love is a natural passion, but it should be kept within due bounds; give some to your mistress, reserve the rest for business; calculate your income, and out of the superfluity make presents to her, but that only from time to time—on her birthday, or such-like occasions." If the young man takes this advice he may be a very useful member of society, extremely serviceable to his prince; but as to his love, it is annihilated, and if he is an artist, his genius is put to flight.'"

"So Lovelace comes off in triumph after all," cried Jack, slapping the table till the china rattled ominously, and the quiet reader's untasted tea overflowed its bounds. "Hurrah for our honourable member! Hurrah for Lovelace too, and Althea may wear her diamonds with as light a heart as a duchess!"

His sister did not go to quite such lengths. The thought involuntarily crossed her mind that if *her* lover were not exactly a man of "cold and correct understanding," such as Werter so much despised, he could hardly be said to be "wearing his health in convincing her that he was entirely devoted to her." Still, as Andrew himself had said, there were midway places between extremes.

"Goethe has my warm acknowledgments," she said then. Nevertheless, when Edmund was hurrying off to make up for lost time, she slipped after him to whisper, "I should like your own opinion too, Teddy, whether it is worth much or not."

He smiled back at the sister who always seemed so much younger than himself.

"I must go with the majority in this case," he answered, in his old-fashioned way. "To my thinking, what would be selfish extravagance when spent upon one's own gratification,

is something quite different when lavished by affection. A skinflint lover seems to me far more objectionable than one who is generous even to rashness."

"Even if, as father says, he cannot afford it?" asked Althea, with a sunny smile.

Edmund raised his eyebrows. "There *are* such things as small retrenchments and self-sacrifices to balance an outlay, are there not, Al? If such should be the case, I certainly think Mr. Valender was right, and could well afford such a gift. Good-bye now, old lady. I must borrow Mercury's heels without another instant's parley."

His sister went back to her duties with thoughtful face, pausing for a brief meditation over the unfamiliar ring. After all, a home was so remotely distant that "sticks and straws" could wait a while. And, whatever her father might say, those diamonds were precious for something far more than their intrinsic value; no one who had not gone through silent conflicts of doubt as she had, not even Andrew himself, could ever know just what those stones were to her. Surely Werter was right, the mother was right, and Jack and Edmund too; they all agreed that Andrew had done well. And if Althea had doubts as to her lover's realizing that proposition of Edmund's about "balancing an outlay"—if the small self-sacrifices that were so easy and natural to them all at home would be quite a novel experience to Mr. Valender, this was not the woman to judge him harshly.

"Poor dear old Teddy," she half whispered; "he is as good as gold. But he has never been in love; and oh! there are so many sorts of goodness in the world."

For the first time in her life Althea was getting impatient with her favourite brother. His high standard of things, that had seemed noble and beautiful in the old days when she had striven upwards to gain a footing beside him, fretted and irked her when it touched the one who had lately come into her life. She knew, as well as any one, that Andrew Valender

was far from perfection; and though Edmund never said so in words, she knew equally well that those observant eyes of his read deeply: and when she saw Andrew's measure being taken, from time to time, it fidgeted her, as if she saw a test being applied he had never been meant to reach.

But there was not a happier woman in England than Althea Holmes a few hours later, when the little box was supplemented by the letter that should have accompanied it. Not a long letter; she did not expect that. Nor a demonstrative one: Andrew had once told her, laughingly, that he was as little lavish of tender phrases as Queen Elizabeth of bestowing knighthood; that he reserved them for the crises of life.

But something lifted the reader's head suddenly, with a glad light in the brown eyes, that drew all the other eyes to them with magnetic attraction.

"Is it good news about my articles?" gasped Jack, with the undisguised self-absorption of youth.

"No, dear; at least nothing definite, though he is still urging your cause. But he is beginning to prepare for the future, and has sold Jess."

"Sold her! Why? Not broken her wind, surely?" asked the eager youth; for Jess had played her part gallantly in his boyish imagination of the "man of the world."

"I think Edmund can guess why," his sister answered softly, with the same radiant glance at the elder brother as she turned to leave the room; and Edmund caught her hand in passing, with a reflected light in his own face, and a quiet, "I am *so* glad, dear Al." But it meant as much from him as if another person had said he was in the seventh heaven, and she knew it, and experienced one of those dozen-times-a-day repentances that were part of Althea's life.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SACRED CHARGE.

"God giveth quietness at last!
The common way that all have passed
She went, with mortal yearnings fond,
To fuller life and love beyond."

WHITTIER.

ALTHEA and her diamonds grew gradually accustomed to each other in the week that followed. She had to put up with an amount of banter, it is true, from one and another of the home party, especially from Jack, who solemnly took back for ever and a day the nick-name of "Beanstick," and inaugurated the "Lady Althea" in the vacant place. It was a little trying sometimes to see the teasing fellow enter a room in pretended quest of her, asking, in his natural hearty manner, "Where Beanstick was;" and when she looked up with a response, to see his mock surprise, and to hear him with bated breath ask, low and reverently: "I beg your ladyship's pardon. It was my madcap sister I wanted. Has your ladyship seen her anywhere in these parts of late?"

"For shame, Jack!" cried the "professor," unexpectedly deserting the attacking party and coming to the rescue of the besieged. "We've teased her enough, and I begin to think she deserves her diamonds after all. She has worn her honours with such becoming meekness."

"*Meekness*, father!" exclaimed the girl, looking up with that peculiarly soft light in her eyes that deeper feelings

always called up; adding, almost inaudibly, "Who could be anything but meek, that sees the meaning beneath the sign?"

The "professor" was silent a moment, with an unusual thoughtfulness upon his brow; then, suddenly putting a finger beneath her chin, he turned up the eloquent face to look more earnestly into its features.

"Child," he said, "it may be you see further than some of us, with your symbols and signs, and yet it seems but yesterday you were playing with your doll. I forget how time passes, and that you are all no longer children. But who taught you to love like this?"

Of course no answer was forthcoming; perhaps he did not expect one, or remembered that it is not care and watching that make the roses unfold. The face he held was so like a rose just then that he released it without further appeal, and added, with deep feeling—

"God bless you, and make you the happy woman you deserve to be."

She *was* happy at this time, as we have seen, and I fear spent a good deal of time in private over the precious ring, though so careful before others to conceal her feelings. It was thoughtful of Andrew, she reflected, to send it just when he did; not during Frank's visit, lest it should accentuate any lingering regrets on his sister's account: but coming immediately after his departure, it formed a very sunbeam of comfort in the natural blank left by Louise. Such a consolation, indeed, that Althea took herself to task sometimes, and wondered if she ought not to be feeling more despondent now that that outward-bound vessel had really gone; if she were not selfish and callous, to be able so soon to laugh and sing.

And going hastily into Louise's little room on one of these days, the carol died away on her lips as she saw her mother kneeling before an open trunk of childish toys, with such an expression on her delicate attenuated face as went to Althea's heart.

Mamsey started at the sound, and tried to summon her usual cheery smile; but the effort failed this time, and she broke down in a succession of sobs that seemed too much for the weak frame to bear—all the more so from her ineffectual efforts at restraint.

"Mother, dearest," cried poor Althea, with a swift pang of self-reproach, "here am I, singing like the unfeeling wretch I am, while you are breaking your tender heart. But oh, Mamsey, do not grieve so—*try* not to! Could our Louise be happier than she is? And in five years at the very latest she hopes to be with us again."

So ran on Althea, almost beside herself at the distress she was powerless to remove, all the while holding the frail form in her arms, and labouring to still the emotion by soothing, hopeful words. At last the outburst was over, and a pitiful attempt at a smile played amidst the tears.

"It is I that am selfish, child," were the first broken words. "It is all true; Louise is happy, and you are happy, and I—I am thankful in my heart of hearts, and shall be happy, too, by-and-by." And, kneeling down again before the great trunk, she laid Louise's old doll tenderly away beside its battered companion, thinking all the while, "In five years, do they say? God will have made my farewells easy long before five years have passed."

That very afternoon poor wilful Mamsey took the step that had been so long neglected, and, during Althea's absence on some errand, slipped out of the house and called upon the plain old country doctor, whose visits in Castle Street were rare. Her absence was so prolonged that both Althea and Kitty grew uneasy, and at the sound of the door both hastened to learn the cause of the delay; something peculiar in her face, however, strangely solemnized them, and checked the eager questions.

"Do not be alarmed," she said then, in tones that, calm and quiet as they were, had lost the old buoyant ring, and sounded unlike the mother's. "I will tell you both, now that

we are alone. I have been to consult Mr. Forbes about my heart, and find I should have done so long ago. Hush, Kitty,"—for at the ominous words the faithful creature could not restrain a cry of dismay,—"hush, or I shall be obliged to keep things from you in future; and I want you and Miss Althea to be perfectly calm, because of the others. They must not be alarmed and made unhappy, should there be no cause. Al, dear, I am going to bed now; Mr. Forbes is coming in half an hour to make a fuller examination. Will you come and help me?"

Long years afterwards Althea remembered the moment in which she and the faithful servant gazed into each other's eyes, as the anguish of coming trouble broke thus suddenly upon them. Words were impossible just then; but they were not needed. It was a glance of mutual sympathy and passionate appeal. And then, as Althea followed her mother on that slow passage upstairs, she was inwardly bracing herself to ask the question on which so much depended.

She could not get it out, however; not even when the little mother was safely in bed, and looking more at rest than she had done for a long time. Althea moved noiselessly about, putting things in their places, and talking soothingly, as well as she could, with her heart feeling like a millstone all the time, and that question lying crushed under its weight. So, when the doctor's ring sent all the blood from her cheeks and lips, and set every pulse beating thickly, the question had not struggled out, and must wait now.

Then she had to stand aside, while Mr. Forbes drew up the blind with a jerk, and proceeded with a hard, inscrutable face to make his examination. He spoke but rarely to Althea; when he did at last put some question, the reply came in such an unnatural tone that the mother's eyes unclosed, and an attempt at the old smile came to her lips.

"Run away for ten minutes, now, Al," she whispered, seeing the grief in the face above her. "You shall come back

to me by-and-by." A hint that, enforced by a stern glance from the doctor, poor Althea dared not disobey. She wandered no further than the stair-head, however, and hung over the balustrades, still with that millstone in her bosom, wondering, in a sick, faint sort of way, if it could really be less than a month since she and Jack had joked on that very spot about Mr. Valender and his valise.

The door at last. With a start Althea was erect again, and the wistful face met the inscrutable one, and something seemed to draw those quivering nerves of hers, and hold them as in a vice, bringing a strange unnatural strength and fixedness of will.

"Is there any danger, Mr. Forbes?"

How quietly the words came now! The doctor made an impatient gesture, and his tone sounded all the harder from the necessity of subduing it.

"Danger!" he cried irritably. "That is just the way with all of you—wait till a precious life is hanging by a thread, and then send for your medical man, and ask if there is danger, when his hands might as well be tied behind his back, for all the use he can be! I won't stay to ask what you have all been about these many years; my business is to act with decision *now*. Your mother will stay where she is at present, and some capable person must sit up with her to-night. Are you the only woman in this house besides that hysterical creature downstairs? Because, if so, I shall seek a nurse at once."

The harsh words hardly hurt Althea now. Perhaps they were intended to do just what they actually accomplished, and rouse all the dormant faculties of her spirit, and test her capability in the sudden crisis. What did it matter—the gruff old doctor behaving as he did? Althea would scarcely have shown surprise at such a time if he had enforced his argument by a blow. All life was standing still; nothing would be wonderful now.

"Mr. Forbes," she said, with grave distinctness, "the only woman who will watch with my mother to-night is myself. Send for whom you will—make what arrangements you will; but this one night we shall be together."

"Can I trust you?" he asked sharply, but more favourably. "I will allow no excitement whatever. Indeed, I would not answer for the consequences. One person, and only one, shall be there this night, and that one shall promise to avoid agitation as she would the——"

He did not utter the word, though his meaning was unmistakable. And though Althea gave him no assurance, he saw she might be trusted, and left her with present instructions and promises to return again before nightfall. Then mother and daughter were once more together.

The sight of Mamsey resting so peacefully against her high pillows, with the old smile come back, and something of the old wilfulness with it, seemed like a sunbeam against a thunder-cloud, as Althea passed to her side; and, for a moment, she could not believe things were so bad. For the mother's ears were acute, and every sound from below had its meaning for her. She could not abandon herself all at once to the *rôle* of the invalid. And when Jack's whistle and the father's cheery tones were both quenched suddenly, as by some intervening hand, Althea heard the faint sigh with which poor Mamsey turned upon her pillows to hide wet eyes.

"Whatever that grim individual may say, I will see them all after tea," she said decidedly. "He had better send me to prison at once, where I should at least be out of earshot. And so you may tell him, child, when he comes again."

But poor Althea was spared the trial when the doctor reappeared; it was the patient herself who took him to task.

"What is it about 'meeting a bear robbed of her whelps,' doctor? He must be a brave man to rob me of mine. And let me tell you that half an hour of their company will do me less harm than fretting after them all the while would do."

Mr. Forbes seeing she had some reason on her side, reluctantly consented, and promised to see them himself as he took his leave. Absorbed, as he was, in his patient, and embittered at what seemed to him a life thrown away, the utter listlessness and dejection of the solitary figure in the dining-room touched some chord in the tough old heart, and stayed the peremptory words that rose naturally to his lips.

"Come, Holmes," he said encouragingly, laying a friendly hand upon the music-master's shoulder, as he sat with head bowed upon his arms, in the first shock of his bewildered grief. "I do not mean to say the case is hopeless, you know. Rest and care, and avoidance of all exertion, may do wonders yet. For all I can say to the contrary, she may live for years with proper care."

He little thought how the words stabbed the poor, tender, self-reproachful heart he meant to soothe. Roy recalled with a pang how every trouble and anxiety of the household had been carried to the mother; how each of them in turn had eased his own burdens by laying them on that brave spirit, till a measure of its higher courage had passed into their own, the very buoyancy of her nature concealing from them that she was overdrawing her small stock of vitality all the while.

He lifted a white, quivering face a moment, as he tried to speak. "I have done her a grievous wrong," he began, with trembling lips. But here the passionate tears broke forth and choked his voice.

"Chut, chut!" cried the old doctor, impatiently. "If you are going to play the fool like that, and behave as if you had murdered her, I'll take my leave at once. Common sense is what we need here. Now listen to me. Do you want to go and talk to your wife a little while? Because she says she is a bear robbed of her whelps until I let you in; and I suppose you are one of them. You'd better go and put your head

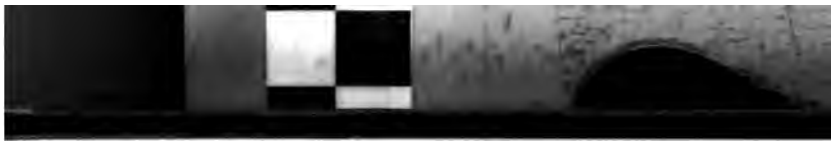
under a pump at once, and not carry such a face as that into a sick room."

Half an hour later, when the little household had worn off its first awe and dismay in Mamsey's bright presence, it seemed only as if they had been through some miserable dream. Ill as she was, she was far from knowing that her life actually hung by a thread, and it was second nature that the despondent faces of her beloved ones should incite her to greater cheerfulness on their behalf. So when she talked to them in her own natural manner, and wondered however she should get through a week's imprisonment in one position, the sunshine soon crept in again, and Roy was inwardly revolving plans for helping out ways and means, that his treasure might have a life of entire rest for the future. Hope was raising her drooping pinions once more. Grim old Mr. Forbes had only given them a fright to make them all careful, perhaps; and never again should such awful means be needed—the precious life was saved, if it rested on their exertions.

And poor grief-stricken Kitty—whom the doctor's lecture had almost sent into one of her "seizures,"—coming in, hesitatingly, with some delicate little concoction she had prepared under medical orders, took heart of grace at the sight of her mistress enthroned like a queen amid her courtiers; with Roy leaning wistfully against her pillows, and the others grouped in various attitudes of comfort around the bed.

"What has Kitty been about?" asked Mamsey, breaking off her tale in surprise, at the sight of her repast. "Dear me, how grand it is to be an invalid! Something smells savoury enough; and, ah! Kitty has chosen my favourite china bowl! Why, it reminds me of when Eva and I had measles, and we thought it was rather nice to wear our prettiest night-dresses, and have the daintiest dishes! I shall be spoilt if you are all going to make so much of me as this."

But Althea glanced warningly at her father, and poor Roy



rose at once, feeling that things were not quite so hopeful again now that it was time to go. To have to say good night to the one who had hardly been parted from him all these long years, seemed cruel indeed; and Mamsey's quick eyes saw the trembling of the lips, and her own quivered slightly. She kept his hand while the others came up for their fond farewell, but her last kiss was reserved for Roy. Something so sacred, so pathetic, came into the look that passed between them then, that the daughter involuntarily slipped away and left them together, just a moment. There was no need for him to express, even had it been wise at such a time, the pain and contrition he had laboured to reveal to the doctor; this wife of his had not lived twenty years at his side without reading his inner feelings, and knowing when the old self-distrust was upon him. It was surely this that made her say so emphatically, as he hung over her, "How different life would have been for us if I had never taken organ lessons in the old church! Oh, Roy! to think what we should have missed! Mine has been a happy life indeed."

He pressed tightly the hand he held, for he dared not put in words the thanks that came rushing to his lips.

"I set a trap to catch a sunbeam when we sparred over the flats and sharps," he said, with a watery little smile. "And the only fault I have to find with my treasure, is her keeping me in ignorance of what I had a right to know. I will let her off until she is about again, and then there will be a worse scolding ready for her than she ever had over the music lessons."

Mamsey smiled back at him, but with something struggling under the smile which she seemed uncertain whether or not to release into expression. She knew quite well that he used those playful words with a desperate feeling that they would in some measure prop up his flattering belief in her recovery, and the mute appeal of the poor tired eyes, that had lost their healthful light to-night, was too much for her resolution. So she left unspoken the deeper thought she would have left with

him had she dared, and only playfully wished him a sound sleep in the "Dutch Interior," and bade him be sure not to set Althea's precious new curtains on fire with his candle.

Althea herself, coming in at the sound of her name, began her unaccustomed night watch with feelings relieved from the first anguish of dread; who could long remain unhappy beside such an invalid as this? The psalm that she read at her mother's request—the evening prayer that she uttered aloud like a child beside her pillows, awakened a more childlike response from the mother-heart even than from her own; and then, as Althea turned the lamp down low, and stood arranging the bed-curtains to effect a perfect shade, her hand was taken suddenly, and Mamsey's lips were pressed upon the diamonds, with one of her old glad, sunny smiles. Something more than gladness had inspired the swift movement, though Althea did not know it: she had not dreamt how perplexing thoughts for her future had often chased away the mother's sleep; and now that her children's way seemed opening, one after the other, it made the prospect of early rest easier and sweeter far.

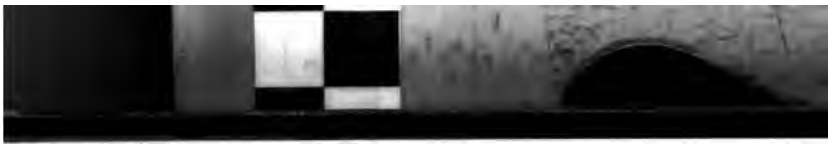
Then, that first sleep—how restful it was, though it lasted so short a time, and though the thought of Althea's watch brought a pang of regret!

"Child," she said, "come and lie down by me. It is absurd to keep you awake like this, when I feel so well—without an ache or pain. I have not felt so rested for a long while."

So, when Althea had administered the prescribed dose, to please her mother, she crept just within the curtain, her head touching the pillow, exactly as she had knelt on the night of her return from Elm-leigh, and Mamsey half whispered—

"Two lines of a hymn I learned in the schoolroom have been ringing in my head all day, with quite a fresh meaning—

> "'Tis not the whole of life to live,
> Nor all of death to die."



They used to seem almost nonsense, Al, but a glimpse of their inner significance has come to me of late."

Althea only pressed her hand for answer. She did not want at that time to grasp the full significance of her mother's words; they touched too closely on a dread subject that would not bear thinking about, and that must be kept at bay. And when the light regular breathing assured her that her patient was again tasting the sweet restoring rest that meant so much, the phantom that had hovered so near but lately, seemed to withdraw once more, and the watcher rose softly from her kneeling position, and turned to watch the growing dawn in the eastern sky.

A slight, almost imperceptible sound startled her, and brought her in an instant to the side of the bed. The sleeper's face had lost its peaceful look, and the expression that had taken its place was so intensely agitated, that Althea's hand stole instinctively to the hot brow; the touch broke the spell, whatever it had been, though relief was still slow to come.

"Have you been dreaming, Mamsey darling?"—for the eyes that gazed so earnestly into her own were wild and terrified, with such a look in them as Althea had never met before.

"Dreaming?" murmured the mother, faintly—"was it *only* a dream? Ah, child!—speak to me again, and tell me if I am awake, for I cannot believe anything so vivid was all a dream."

Althea drew aside the curtain, and let in the clear light of the brightening dawn. "See there, mother, where the day is coming—another beautiful new day! It was indeed only an ugly dream. Forget it as fast as possible; or, better still, tell it all to me. That is the way to dismiss evil visions."

"It was nothing distinct, though so horribly real," murmured Mamsey, pressing her thin hands over her eyes, as if to shut out the phantom that troubled her. "It was some trouble, some mysterious, awful trouble that threatened one of our boys, all the more hideous because, though I strove so hard to see its shape, it was ghostly and indistinct to the last. Oh,

Althea, child, if you had only known what I was suffering! Straining eyes to see, and weak arms to help—and all the while the shadow coming nearer and nearer, in spite of me! The horror was so real I cannot even yet believe it to be a mere dream." The weak voice broke down at this point, and a great shuddering shook the slight frame from head to foot.

Althea, almost beside herself with fears for the effect of such deep agitation, had yet presence of mind to remember Mr. Forbes's demand for common sense; and, drawing the hot throbbing head to her bosom, as she knelt beside her, replied unfalteringly—

"Still, mother dearest, it is always best to look ghosts in the face, that we may the sooner laugh at ourselves for being frightened. If your ugly vision meant sickness, all I can say is, our boys are made of splendid stuff, and are not likely to be easily pulled down. Which of them was the victim, by the way, Mamsey? You have not said yet."

"Don't jest about it, Al. I cannot do so. I cannot tell you, either, which of them it was I was striving to reach. But it was agony enough to last a lifetime."

"Then I would forget it all in a good sleep, dearest," was the soothing reply. "If you won't let me laugh, I certainly won't let you fret. Only think, Mamsey—a nameless shadow touching one of your sons, but you could not see which! Could anything be more plainly construed into a touch of nightmare?"

"Hush, Althea; I *must* speak, or my heart will break. Oh help me, child, to believe it was nothing more than a dream! The trouble I could only dimly see was something very, very dreadful. Not sickness: in some shape or other, it was sin—falsehood—wrong." And no longer able, as she had once been, to restrain emotion, the deep agonized sobs broke forth uncontrollably.

Oh, how Althea longed at that moment for her stern monitor of the afternoon! She managed to administer a

small cordial, and then applied herself with desperate calm to laying poor Mamsey's ghost.

"Your phantom has outwitted himself, mother," she began. "It is really too preposterous to torment you so. If ever lads were steady and trustworthy—ours are. Arthur, who, since he left school seven years ago, has never given us an hour's anxiety—Ted, plodding and punctual, as old Father Time—Jack, who, though boisterous, is as open as the day: which of the three is likely, do you think, to go to ruin in that fashion? Oh, mother, laugh with me at the gross imposture, and then thank God, as I do, that you are awake from an evil dream!"

"How I tried to see the face," moaned the poor mother, "but it always faded into mist as I drew near. Now it was Edmund's eyes that I seemed to see—then something of Arthur's look—and then, again, a glimpse of some other less well-known face. Ah, Althea, have I hurt *you* as well as myself?"

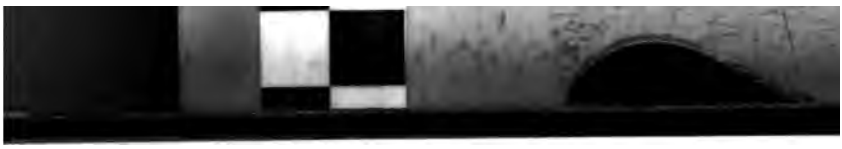
For at that hint, vague though it was, Althea's cheeks had paled in a moment as her eye met her mother's in swift inquiry, while those ominous predictions at Elm-leigh surged back into her memory. She put them all from her, however, with a resolute hand, even while she felt life suddenly pause; this was not the moment to think of self in any shape or form.

"We cannot answer for the future, mother," she said in a tone strangely solemnized, that seemed to soothe poor Mamsey more than the jesting had done. "That is in God's hands. But if love and devotion can guard our boys from evil, none are safer in this world than they. If home is sacred, as ours has always been, does it not go far to make all life sacred too?"

"God bless you!" said the mother, with the first sigh of relief. "And oh, Althea, if I should be called away sooner than we once thought, you will be faithful to those I leave behind? Even if you are no longer with them—if you are

safe and sheltered in a home of your own, you will let nothing come between your brothers and you? Whatever happens, whether good or evil, you will be true to *them?*"

There was no time to answer, had there been need. One of those sudden changes crossed the mother's earnest, entreating face; a spasm of mortal pain convulsed all her features; and, just as the doctor's muffled ring sounded below, her hands flew to her side with agonized pressure;—there was a shuddering sigh, and the tender faithful heart had ceased to beat.



CHAPTER XX.

HALLOWED GROUND.

"All houses wherein men have lived and died,
Are haunted houses."

LONGFELLOW.

DWELLINGS have their consecrations, as well as temples and burial grounds. There are homes that receive a species of baptism, as well as their inmates. Is it strange it should be so? Would it not be strange, rather, if the home in which a whole lifetime is spent (as the soul lives in the tenement called the body) should not partake of the life of its occupants, and reflect their passing emotions, with degrees of faithfulness varying according to the measure in which it is truly a home?

Signs and symbols lie everywhere around us; they are upon our lips continually. With more or less of faith, according to our nature, we adopt them for ourselves and acquiesce in their fitness. By-and-by that mighty force within us that we call Nature, and which perhaps means *God*, speaks out plainly, and then we go beyond mere acquiescence, and reach the assimilating-point.

That plot of ground, for instance, that the Bishop comes to separate from neighbouring acres, and dedicate to sacred uses by solemn prayer and act of blessing: the grass waves as softly—the daisies spring as freshly—in other plots, over which no prayer of consecration has been said; yet, realizing the meaning within the sign, we acquiesce in the setting-apart,

and are satisfied. But to understand the full meaning of consecration—in a deep, personal sense—we must wait till our first dead are laid to rest within those bounds.

For something that comes from God Himself—though we speak of it as a *Natural* emotion—makes itself felt then, and brings home to us, more forcibly than by formula, the truth that this is indeed hallowed ground.

And so when Nature, for her elevating purposes, takes a home in hand, she consecrates more by memory and association than by anticipatory acts. She does not care what are the outer materials with which such homes are made; wood and plaster are as acceptable to her as stone or marble: it is the life-history that, in long years, has been working itself out within them—the thousand-fold recollections of pain and pleasure, fun and frolic, that form in the ideal home a consecrated tapestry, clothing with soft touches what others only regard as naked, prosaic walls. We hardly see that sort of tapestry while from day to day it is being woven; it grows silently as the moss or lichens form on the bare rock: but should we revisit the scene of its growth after long years, the colours will start into life with almost painful clearness, even though strangers may have since inhabited those walls, and seen nothing of what exists only for ourselves.

So, as I say, the ideal home receives a sort of baptism when it curtains its windows for its first dead. Death is an old reality in the world—as old as Love; yet, until it touches us individually, we hardly understand its existence, and even then the knowledge comes to us in differing degrees. Households that strike their roots very loosely in the soil—having many dwelling-places, but no true home—to them the pain of loss and upheaval is as nothing compared with that experienced by the family whose life has coiled itself in ever-strengthening fibres under the same rooftree.

Some such dimly-understood thoughts as these were in Althea's mind as she returned with her father and brothers

to the little home where a sunny welcome had ever been wont to await them, and the absence of which brought a pang as sharp and new as if the blow had only just fallen. The very house seemed to share their sorrow, and shrink into itself; the home music had been silenced, and the air was heavy with the unnatural quiet.

It would devolve upon the daughter now, to put aside her own grief, and apply herself to winning back such of that music as was possible; to binding up the deep wound the family tree had sustained, lest its precious sap should waste away in irretrievable loss. But Althea was not ready for that part yet. How could she, who had leaned so utterly on another's judgment, fit herself in a moment to take up the threads laid down but now by more skilful hands? The mother's nature was not so complex; she was not given to dreaming, like Althea, over perplexing questions. She had had a humble part to play, but she had thrown herself into it with perfect self-abandonment, and when the crisis of life had come to her so soon after becoming a wife, it had not found her wanting.

But the second Althea was not meant, surely, to be only a copy of the first. Nature does not copy, but reproduces in endless variety. She had lingered in the fashioning of this particular study of hers, and Althea's mental features developed as slowly as her face and form; but when *her* life's crisis should come, it was possible she, too, would give in a true answer.

At present, however, she was not wise. It was not right of her to leave the others in lonely wretchedness below, while she made that melancholy pilgrimage from room to room, calling up a myriad tender recollections of the past, and breaking her heart over what now looked, to her morbid fancy, like blind neglect of the precious life.

The "Dutch Interior," for instance. Oh, could it be only a few short weeks since she had bewailed its bareness to

Mamsey, and cared so much for anything so trivial? There still hung the draperies prepared by that loving, unselfish hand, at the cost of needful rest. And as Althea's tears fell like rain upon their folds, it cut her to the heart that she should, even for a little while, have felt ashamed of the humble home that had now grown doubly sacred since an angel had left it. And in the passionate repentance of such a thought, and the dread lest it should ever return, the old cry rose from her heart, as it had done at Elm-leigh in a somewhat similar temptation, "O God! teach me to aspire, lest I prove untrue to myself. Save me from sordid and worldly aims. Breathe me upward, lest I forget the past and prove unfaithful to the precious trust of such a training, and such an example."

And all the more urgently the words came, with the thought that she, too, was some day to help to build a home; that the spirit she brought to its foundation would greatly affect the superstructure that was to rise. For such intangible work as home-building may, like more material house-building, be reared on the sand or on the rock.

Althea had not asked Andrew Valender to attend the funeral; an instinctive feeling that he would rather be spared such a heart-breaking gathering held her back. Their engagement had been so recent and their intercourse so short at present, that she felt, even while she hardly confessed it to herself, that his presence would be an embarrassment at such a time. That he did not lack deeper feelings she knew, as well as she knew his horror of betraying them. And if she did not feel she could carry her bleeding heart to him just yet for comfort, she had no fears for his tenderness when they should begin their new life together. Her sorrowful questions about Andrew seemed all laid to rest on Mamsey's dying pillow. Had not Mamsey herself bidden her to hope, and trust, and *love*? Althea even felt, now, that she would much rather *not* have Andrew "a ready-made hero." She felt so far from the heroic herself, with her daily and hourly repentances, that it would be

sweeter to climb the Hill Difficulty, towards the Celestial City, side by side, than to be either far ahead or far behind her life companion.

Poor Althea's repentances came so thickly, indeed, that they trod upon the heels of each other. She had not recovered from her self-upbraiding over the new curtains before Kitty appeared, in all the gruesome novelty of her black attire; and her large cap was so thickly littered with black ribbon bows, that it almost sent off her young mistress into hysteric laughter, in the present disturbance of her condition.

"Miss 'Thea," began the faithful woman, with real earnestness, "I do wonder at you, wasting your time and strength up here in crying, and leaving poor master like a dazed creature, all by himself! Do you think *I* don't want to cry, bless you? —that have known that blessed angel longer than you, after all said and done! But a bucket full of tears won't do as much for her as looking after them she's left behind. I've took in the tea, and there's nobody to touch it. *Do* go down and be a bit of help."

Althea needed no second bidding. And that first melancholy meal after a funeral was at length despatched, and the members separated. Roy's face seemed to have aged and faded, as if twenty years had passed since the time he had wished his wife good night with a jest; and Althea found she could do little for him yet awhile. His grief at the open grave had been like Jack's in its openness and passion, but now he seemed to avoid notice or attempts at consolation.

Arthur and Edmund had hardly shed a tear; but the sister recalled how opposite had been the expression of their faces. Her eyes had met those of her favourite brother across the mother's flower-strewn grave, and the solemn calm of Edmund's look had nerved and strengthened Althea. Of all her children, the one who could best follow the bright spirit to the unseen beyond, was surely that quiet, thoughtful boy.

The gloom on Arthur's brow, on the other hand, was so

hopeless that it oppressed his sister, and made it more difficult to her to approach. How she longed for Louise, with her sweet instinctive delicacy of touch, at such a time! Arthur had always been influenced by Louise; she was not so painfully fearful of rebuffs where she did not feel sure of her ground: and five years' absence from ordinary home life had placed this brother rather out of Althea's ken.

"I know what you are thinking, Arthur," she began, hesitatingly, urged by the dejection that betrayed itself in every line of his figure; "but, indeed, there was not time to send even to the next room, had you been in it. And her very last words were——"

"Hush!" he broke in hoarsely, clasping his hands tightly over his eyes. "You mean well, but you only torture me. Some things are only endured by being locked away, out of sight. Never mind me, Al."

"But is there *nothing* I can do to help you?" she entreated. And her persistency wrung from him a question he had not thought to put.

"General offers of help are far less rare than particular ones, Althea," he said, looking up at length with a wistful nervous hesitation. "Would you help me in the one and only way I want, if I were to ask it?"

"I should think you know me better than to doubt it, Arthur," was the almost reproachful reply.

"That depends on circumstances," he rejoined; and his face flushed and paled with painful rapidity, as he said, at last, with suppressed excitement, "It is a case of least said, soonest mended. Words are mere waste of time in a strait like mine. The simple fact is, Althea, that I am driven hard for a little ready money, and do not know where to turn."

It was certainly no new thing in Castle Street to be cribbed and cabined for want of means; it was not that that brought a look of surprise to the listener's face. The novelty was to see the quivering lips, the downcast air, that accompanied the

appeal; but even yet her simple idea only went as far as the deficit of a week or two's rent.

"Let us see," she began encouragingly, emptying her small purse upon the table.

But the burning flush only deepened on Arthur's brow, as, pushing the little stock away from him, he said, half-pityingly, half-impatiently—

"Nonsense, Al! I don't want your shillings and sixpences, child! They won't tide me over my difficulty, even if I were mean enough to take them. But one might as well reason with a baby as expect you to understand."

"Yet I understand money to *mean* money, Arthur," she said gently, passing by the slight to herself in concern for him.

"Exactly. But not shillings and half-crowns. Oh, Al, I would not be so mean if I were not desperate! Can't you think of any other way to come to the rescue?"

"It is of no use asking father," she began; "and Teddy——"

But Arthur cut her short. "I should think not, indeed! Ask poor father at such a time! I might as well ask him for the clothes from his back at once. Not a *word* to him, Althea, mind!—or to any of them! I must pull myself through as best I can."

"But what is it you mean I can do, Arthur," asked his sister, with redoubled earnestness. "Only tell me, and I will help you to my uttermost, though that is small enough."

"Well, then, it is this," he blurted out, as if the words stung his lips in utterance: "ask your friend Valender to advance me a hundred pounds or two, on my bond. He is the only person I can think of, now Conway is gone."

Althea started, and her figure unconsciously straightened, as she recoiled a pace from his side. "You have forgotten yourself, Arthur, I think," she said, with unusual difficulty.

A short reckless laugh was the only immediate reply. When he did speak, it was to say, dryly, "I beg your pardon. I see that you, like most women, set very narrow limits when you

talk of your uttermost. It sounds well, but it only means, in reality, your present convenience."

Althea felt a great lump rising in her throat, even while the angry blood rushed to her cheeks. She conquered both, however, and said as quietly as before—

"We will not quarrel on such a day as this. It is bitter to want money, I know, and that is what makes you unlike yourself. But when you are straight again, you will see how impossible is the thing you ask of me. Why, Arthur, you must know that I would rather——"

"Rather die, I suppose," he interrupted again. "That is the usual feminine resort in emergencies. Dying is so easy in theory—so much easier and more imposing than taking a little trouble and inconvenience to help a distressed brother. Very well, Althea; I have my answer. I will take my chance."

"Don't you see, Arthur," she persisted, in almost desperate earnestness, "that even if I could stoop to the humiliation of applying for money to the man who—— Oh, Arthur! trouble has made you hard, or you would see the cruelty of even wishing it! Besides, Mr. Valender is not the person to resort to, even if I could,—he is poor himself."

Arthur's lip curled disdainfully. "There are degrees of poverty, I am well aware; and a duke may be called poor in comparison with his brother dukes. But to come down to our own standard, I should say that the man who can throw away fifteen or twenty guineas on a trinket——"

"My engagement ring has already been discussed," observed Althea, coldly.

"Well, then, the man who in reality stands in my light—for if any one has a claim to the Elm-leigh estate it is rather myself than Mr. Valender—would have no reason to think the request of a small loan a preposterous affront. Think, Althea! *Is* it so preposterous, after all?"

"It is simply impossible, Arthur," she answered, faintly, but decisively.

He rose at once. His lips stopped their tremulous play, and closed firmly, while his whole manner passed from bitterness and excitement to a quiet self-possession, that touched his sister far more than his previous mood. He seemed more like the Arthur of old days again, as he made his simple preparations for departure, his sister following him with a wistful tenderness and a sickening sense of self-reproach, mingled with a new uneasiness and foreboding.

"What *is it*, Arthur?" she asked again, after one of these yearning glances in his direction.

"Nothing," he replied, indifferently enough. "I have made a little mistake; but, as you say, it is impossible to help it now. I will take my chance, and pull through."

No inducement of hers could win more from him; he had broken through his reserve to make a desperate appeal, and had been repulsed: such, Althea felt, was their mutual standing; for, disguise her refusal with what tenderness she would, it amounted to a repulse in her brother's present mood. He came out from his father's room with wet eyes, but they were dried before his sister gave him her farewell kiss; and then, sadly enough, she watched the three lads, in their simple mourning, on their way to the station, after this most trying of days. At the corner of Castle Street, one of them turned for another look at the little home nest; but he was too far off to discern the face at one of its upper windows, that followed him with tearful eyes. His heart was heavy as lead as the corner was turned, but he did not know that he had looked his last on the scene of so many memories.

CHAPTER XXI.

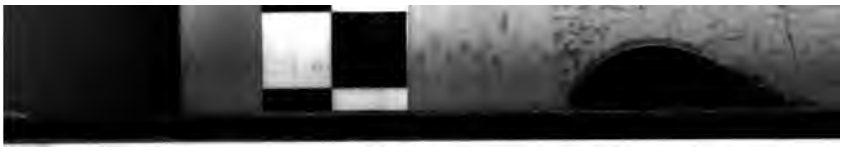
UNDER THE CLOUD.

"(So) disasters come not singly;
But as if they watched and waited,
Scanning one another's motions,
When the first descends, the others
Follow, follow, gathering flock-wise
Round their victim, sick and wounded,
First a shadow, then a sorrow,
Till the air is dark with anguish."

Hiawatha's Ghosts.

KEBLE had much right on his side when he said the doom of labour that fell upon mankind, after the Fall, "was half in mercy given." How many have had cause to re-echo the sentiment, and perhaps never more so than after some great and paralyzing grief! It is sorrowful work at first, going back to the daily task of hand or brain, and those who are not compelled to do so are in need of strong principle, or of the moral courage that acquires self-mastery.

But the little household in Castle Street were not put to such a test, for Necessity (like Pharaoh's task-masters) gave them no choice, but compelled them to fulfil each his daily work; and as Althea let in the sunlight once again to the familiar rooms, and saw her dear ones depart to their duties, she heaved a passing sigh of thankfulness that the hours of stagnating sorrow were necessarily cut short. She had enough to do herself those first days, as she went with an aching heart



about her varied duties, but, deep as was her grief, it was mingling already with a sense of anxiety. How would it be possible ever to fill, in any way, the void so suddenly left in the circle, for the pivot on which the whole machinery of the household turned was lacking now — the inner mechanism was displaced on which the home music depended for its very existence.

Her father was her chief thought. The youthful look that had always characterized him hitherto, in spite of some signs of advancing age, had vanished completely; all his freshness had departed—he was like an instrument run down. The very art that used to be such a solace had turned against him, and added its reproaches to the accusations within his own breast; for poor Roy's natural buoyancy could give place on occasion, as we have seen, to the most despondent self-torture, and at such times his inner questions were as distrustful as Althea's own. He did not tell his children of the trouble that was oppressing him; but in those first days he seemed to see himself in the light only of a selfish coward, who, but for his own blind absorption in the pursuit he loved, might have had his blessing still. How like an idiot he had been to rave, as he had, to Andrew Valender about hobbies, when but for his own he might have been a prosperous man! How he had almost exulted in the "rusty coat," and talked such scorn of "wise-acres," when the scorn was all in their hands to fling at the man who could not keep his wife and children as he ought, because of this so-called devotion to art! He forgot all his wife had said to him of their happy married life—forgot, for the time being, those years of sunshine in such a home as no wealth could have made. In his utter despondency, it seemed to Roy that in the most prosaic shop or counting-house he would have found his duty, and that, of all failures on the face of God's earth, he was the greatest.

So Althea had much to reflect upon now, and anxiety for her father divided the day with her other griefs. It was in the

long night hours, when sleep was slow to come, that Arthur and his affairs returned chiefly to her mind with a vague uneasiness. She would not confess, even to herself, that poor Mamsey's terrible dream enhanced this feeling—it was too superstitious; yet it goaded her on to asking herself seriously if she had done all for her brother that was possible.

Of course, it was out of the question to appeal to Andrew; but one night the idea grew very strongly upon her that she might consult Miss Grace, whose practical notions would be a comfort, when the having to depend on her own judgment, all at once, was so hard. She need not ask for money exactly, she *could* not, even to help Arthur; but the kind letters she had received from both her relatives since her loss, nerved her into resolving to take Miss Grace into her confidence, and seek her advice. So Althea fell asleep at last, mentally preparing the difficult letter that she little knew would be already too late, for many a breakfast table would be startled that morning, besides those in little Harington, by the news, that was already on its way, of the robbery of a Liverpool bank.

Daily newspapers were, however, among the many little luxuries dispensed with in the household most concerned, so that the blow did not fall on them so soon as it might have done, and father and sons had departed nearly half an hour before Edmund re-crossed the threshold of what was now a dishonoured home; thoughtful, even in his first agony, lest his sister should first hear the news from harsher lips.

"Althea, are you there?" he called gently, at the foot of the stairs; for he heard voices above, and knew that she and Kitty must be about the early duties of the day.

"What is it, Teddy?" she asked, in some slight surprise at his return, and bending over the little balustrade to learn his errand. But he stood back, out of sight, that she should not see his blanched face just at first, and only called to her to come and join him. And Althea, running lightly down, with hair just caught and sported with by the September

breezes, and cheeks touched with the colour activity lends, saw the white, steadfast face, and her heart stood suddenly still. Not a scared look, however, was that which met her own; it was the steadfastness under the grief that, somehow, passed into her own spirit, and seemed to nerve her to meet the very worst that might be coming.

He drew her into the dining-room, shut and locked the door, and then took his sister into his arms: this sister-friend of his, who, taller as she was, and older by two years, had always looked to him, even in childish days, and was, he knew, leaning upon him now. He could feel her heart beating, though she said so quietly—

"It is *father*, Edmund! Something has happened to him. Tell me the worst."

"No, it is not father. Al," he said with intense earnestness, "this is the moment for us to forget self altogether—you will help me, I know. I come to you first, partly because we two are in a sense provided for, and partly because I think we are stronger than the others. Something dreadful has happened that will require all our courage—we shall have no time to think how it touches ourselves. I am thinking of our poor heart-broken father—and the boy."

He drew out the morning paper as he spoke, and held her close while she read; and Althea felt everything turning round in wild confusion as she followed the sentences to the end. And then the brother and sister took one long look into each other's eyes.

"Oh, *poor* Arthur!"

That was the name that was wrung first from Althea's very heart. And it brought Edmund's look back to herself with a surprise that had something in it of awe. His own feelings had received such a shock in the idea of the frightful wrong done to the innocent, that his heart had no room as yet for pity for the wrong-doer; the very utmost he could do was to fight down the bitterness such guilt had provoked.

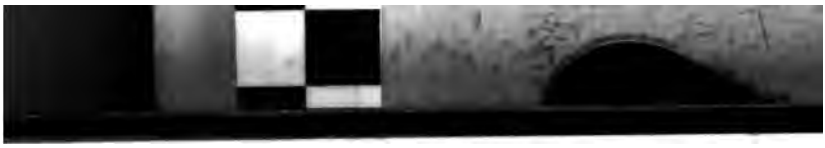
He looked at his sister for a moment, as if he thought her more than human. He did not know that people who have "seven times a day" repentances generally find the lesson of forgiveness easy where others stumble. Besides, who knows but she might be reaping where another had sown before she had come into being? When the first Althea—the child-wife—had awoke all suddenly to find life something quite different to her rosy dreams; when she had made her choice for good, and resolved to forget herself in another, to love and cling to the man she could not worship longer as the hero, her young eyes could not foresee the results, it is true, but it is little to be doubted that they would be reproduced in the children that were yet unborn. The chain of causation is so long that we altogether lose sight of its links, but we do well not to forget its certain existence; that it is being welded through countless generations; and that our part is to see that our particular link is sound, and has the true ring, lest those who come after us may suffer from our rust or flaw.

"*Poor* Arthur!" Edmund exclaimed. "Oh, Althea! the man who can go from the open grave of one parent to break the heart of the other! Have you pity for him already?"

"The wrong was done before our loss, Edmund," she interrupted quickly, as she scanned the paragraph afresh. "See, the dates of the two different occasions when the money was first missed! And the remorse and horror that must have filled poor Arthur's mind when summoned home for our mother's funeral must make pity possible to the hardest. It was the craving to undo the wrong, or at least to replace the money and prevent discovery, that made him so desperate with me."

And then, as rapidly as she could, she detailed to Edmund what had passed between Arthur and herself the evening he left them.

"I did well to come to you first," was the low reply, when her sorrowful tale came to an end. "By-and-by you will



teach me charity such as I long for. At present, I cannot forget father—and her who is gone. But, if daddy will let me, I shall go to Liverpool to-day, and see if anything be yet possible. In any case, I must see *him*."

"And yet you have no charity, Edmund!" rejoined his sister, with a sorrowful, incredulous, half smile.

"It cannot be called charity," he persisted. "I go to prevent further mischief, if possible. If he has come to his senses, he will be almost ready to put an end to himself, in his first despair. Now I am going to find father."

But Althea was not quite the heroine her brother believed her; and, engrossed though she was with her father and poor undisciplined Jack, it was out of all reason that she should put self entirely aside, as Edmund had said; and there was time in those succeeding days of misery for many an anxious thought as to her own future. Edmund was as good a brother as girl ever had, she was constantly telling herself; and yet—and yet—oh, how could he judge for *her?* He who had never known the Happy Valley, except in books and dreams, and therefore could not understand that other things beside rose-leaves of delight are the spoils of such a visit.

He had scarcely appreciated Andrew, it is true; but, at the same time, he had never doubted his good faith. All his doubts had been as to whether the man was worthy of his sister; whether he was likely to make her happy. And now that a tremendous trial had fallen upon her, it did not occur to Ted that the lover might change his mind. It was this childlike simplicity and ignorance of the world and its standards that irked Althea nowadays, and often made her feel that dear, noble, but home-reared Teddy was something of a Don Quixote, after all, cherishing visionary ideas that would not work in everyday life.

There was no mother to turn to now, and to no one else could Althea open her heart, and say, "Tell me, will this touch my love?" Sometimes she dared not ask it even of

herself, or face the bare possibility of a life that would henceforth be like a casket from which the jewel has been stolen. At others, especially in the darkness of night, she forced herself to sift and weigh all the evidence, so to speak—balancing her mother's faith in Andrew against the vague disquiet that had troubled herself at times, ever since her engagement; and this, together with her aunts' predictions, had a terrible tendency to weigh down the scale. So it was small wonder that the colour was fast leaving her cheek, and the light fading from her eyes. Althea came downstairs for three successive mornings looking for the letter that would decide her fate, and bearing its absence each time more quietly, if more hopelessly, than before.

"Nature's mightiest effort is to *wait*." This hard waiting time was perhaps doing for one heart in that sorrow-stricken home something of what the snow does for the earth under a dreary frost—driving its genial forces inwards, and preserving its vital heat for a distant bloom. Anyway, there were no childish sobs, no passionate outbreaks at this time; these were left to poor Jack, who carried to his sister the griefs he dared not descant upon to his father, in his present desolation; and Althea had to listen to all the peculiar trials attending the position of a half schoolboy, half usher, in the humiliation of a shadowed name. While the father's grief, on the other hand, seemed beyond mere words. The disgrace to himself was swallowed up in the fear that it would reflect on the training of one who was gone, and who, to his mind, had combined the mother with the angel. Yet, strange to say, it did not make him bitter towards his son. Such a tender nature as his had no room for bitterness; the great unsuspected depths of fatherly pity welled up and carried away all resentment; and Althea heard him murmuring continually, "God help my poor boy."

It was a relief to have Edmund home again, and to talk things over all together. Even Kitty was allowed to linger much

longer than was necessary, when she came in with some excuse; for faithful Kitty's sympathy was welcome at such a time, and her master's griefs and joys had always been her own. But when everything affecting Arthur—past, present, and future—had been discussed, even to shreds, Althea could not resist asking her brother, as they bid each other good night in the semi-darkness of the landing—

"Edmund, what did you mean that day when you spoke of our being provided for—we two—more than the others?"

"Why, that your marriage would secure your future, as my profession would mine. What else should I mean, Al?" he asked in surprise.

"But — do you think — troubles of this nature—do not sometimes affect—people?"

The question was out at last, and was met by a look of prolonged surprise.

"That depends upon the *people* more than the troubles, I should think," he replied, very slowly. "What does Mr. Valender say?"

"*Nothing*. Good night, Teddy." And the door was shut suddenly, almost in his face; for the question had broken up what had been freezing into ice during these trying days of waiting, and the long rain of tears was a relief.

The thought of that first evening in the Elm-leigh shrubbery came forcibly back to Althea that night as she lay through the sleepless hours. The message of the elms seemed to return with vivid distinctness—that she was no longer a child, but must face the woman's destiny; live out her short span, and *manage* it; and by-and-by would be the time to lay it down. And coupled with this came another message in Mamsey's familiar voice—"It is sweet to lean; but it is better to learn. A mother can only lead her children half way."

"Ah! those elms," sighed Althea to herself. "Well may they live calmly on through the generations! But as for us, we would not live so long, even if we could. One short mortal

life may be far too long. But I will look mine in the face. I will write to-morrow."

It did not take so long in the accomplishment as that first letter, though it meant so much; neither was there any reason now to recall Miss Wynton's stern axioms. She did not say anything about her unchanged love, that being a fact of which Andrew was so well assured; but only put his freedom again into his hands, to do with as seemed good to him. And then, with drooping head and tired heart, took up another day of waiting.

But when the answer did come, her nerves were too unstrung to open it for a long, long while, and the letter lay half the morning hidden from sight, because she dared not break the spell, and learn what colour her life would henceforth take. And even when broken at last, any other than love's clear vision would have hesitated in its verdict; but Althea was not even for a moment deluded. She knew that beneath those affectionate, even tender sentences faltered the resolution of one who shrank unutterably from acting dishonourably towards the woman of his choice, but who yet lacked the courage to adhere to her in the face of the world. No, she was not deceived even by the ambiguous "I am passing Harington on private business on Thursday next, and will call and talk things over."

It was kind of Andrew to come on such a painfully difficult errand, to soften to her what it would have saved himself so much trouble to do by writing; but it only made her resolve the more that he and Edmund should not run the risk of a meeting. For Althea felt that if there were one thing more than another that she could not endure, it would be to hear Andrew blamed. They had jested together, in the golden days of their wooing, about the Harington "Goliaths" (ah, with what a pang the remembrance came!), but something told her that lover and brother would be best apart henceforth; for calm though Edmund was, he could, under strong feeling, utter words that would sting like a scorpion. So a brief missive was despatched in answer.

"Do not go to Castle Street. There is a path from the station leading direct to the river meadows. I will be waiting at the bend of the brook. Whatever we have to say can be said there. Till then,

"Your friend,

"ALTHEA."

She could not tell him not to come, even though she guessed the private business was all a fabrication, or that it lay, rather, at Harington, and there only. "People take longer journeys than that," she reflected, "to stand beside a dying bed; and surely if love is dying, it demands a farewell."

CHAPTER XXII.

FAREWELL.

"Only a summer dream—
Sport of an idle day.
A meadow range; a word beside the stream;
A parting and—away!

"The summer voices blend
In music as of yore;
But from the melody has dropt a note.
There will be song no more."

ANON.

WHO has not known the benumbing effect of pain, until one has grown accustomed to its daily companionship? Grief knocks as a stranger at a peaceful heart, and its features are scarcely seen in the surprise and excitement of a first arrival. It is when it sits down beside the hearth, and says, "I am come to stay," that the *ache* comes after the apathy; and only then, in the strict sense, do we become "acquainted" with sorrow.

The girl, hastening along the meadow pathways with swift steps, now pausing to gaze dreamily at some well-remembered spot, and now speeding on again with the resolution of despair, is somewhere midway between these two positions; fully conscious of the close neighbourhood of Sorrow, and yet putting it aside until one definite step had been taken, which would demand all her strength. As if she would say, "Wait. Give

me this one brief hour. All my life will henceforth be yours."

And now the appointed place was reached—the little arm of the river up which the *Mayfly* had made its difficult passage only a few weeks ago. Althea almost shivered as her sorrowful eyes followed the dimpling water; and, standing a moment with hands locked tightly together, the lurking whisper that had haunted her of late came back with tenfold force: "Is *this* God's answer to my prayer? Is *this* what comes to women who thank God upon their knees for happy love?"

The thought was terrible; and, turning away, for it was full early yet, she sped with the energy of something like despair further up the river; on and on through the peaceful meadows with swift movement and hurrying breath, the only clear idea of the moment being that, whatever happened, she would be calm at the approaching meeting. And then she stopped suddenly, remembering that she had wandered far, and that some one would be waiting, and that there was no longer any time for delay.

Her walk, swift and rapid as it had been, had failed to bring colour to her cheeks, or else the figure that came forward to meet her had driven it away. Althea only saw one thing in that first moment—that his face was whiter even than she felt her own to be, and the sight thrust self for the present quite into the background, and the old yearning to help him awoke within her. Once more, as in the Elm-leigh garden, she almost forgot that she was young; the glimpse of his suffering had well-nigh banished the sense of her own, and there was something of the mother, as well as of the wife and sister, in the instinct that brought her hands softly within his own.

"Andrew," she said, looking up at him with a new kind of tenderness in her face, "you must not grieve so. I can understand what you have come to say, without need of words. I will bear it—dearest."

Ah, how was it that a word like that should rise to her lips

for the first time, only as the brief courtship came to an end What made it easy, almost natural now, when hitherto she ha not indulged in one caressing word? All faltering, all hesita tion seemed to have disappeared along with the changin colour and the mantle of shyness: she looked so calm, s steadfast—the paleness of her face enhanced by the clingin black draperies—that it seemed to her lover this could not b the girl he had wooed so lately; that, with the freedom sh was giving him back, she was folding up the vesture of he youth and sweet attractiveness, as a thing that is wanted n longer, and must be laid aside.

"Althie," he broke out suddenly, in a desperate feeling afte the creature he once knew by that name, "Althie, do not loo at me *so*. It breaks my heart. Reproach me, spurn me fo my weakness, upbraid me for unfaithfulness—anything rathe than kill me with a kindness I do not deserve. I loath myself all the time—I have struggled to hold to you in spit of everything and everybody, but I am not strong enough Speak out and say that you despise me. It would hurt m less."

"I could not, Andrew," she said wonderingly. "Despis you, after loving you? Besides, the wrong is not yours; it i on our side, and my name is quite different to what it was An unnatural barrier has sprung up between us, and it is no likely that you should be able to break it down—it is delusion of Edmund's to think so. It would require a stron man indeed to do that."

The last words were intended more for herself than for he listener; they seemed spoken in spite of herself, and she di not see the gist of her unconscious argument. Andrew saw i however, and he smiled sorrowfully enough.

"And I am very far from strong," he said, half bitterly "You always had to drive me into anything good, even at th first. But oh! Althea—you do not know how hard it ha been! Everybody has been against it—everybody; my uncl

Valender most of all. Not that any mortal opposition would have had weight, if only I were in an independent position, but the last day or two have shown me the truth. For a poor man, on the lowest round of the ladder as I am yet, thanks to wasted opportunities, it would be sheer madness, in a profession like mine, to form a connection with—well, what *is* the word for a man who helps himself to another's goods, Althea?"

He felt the spasm that darted momentarily through the hand he held, but she retained her calm.

"I am not reproaching you, Andrew," she said, with that yearning look still in her face. "Why seek to justify yourself as if I were?"

And yet if she had studied how most completely to humiliate him, she could scarcely have succeeded better than by the perfect meekness of look and tone, that, to spare him, accepted suffering without a murmur. More forcibly even than before he began to realize the blessing he was letting slip, and to gauge the nature whose depths he had not half discovered. This gentle submission seemed hardly possible in the same woman who had flashed upon him indignantly because his wooing had seemed to her lacking in fervour. He gazed at her a moment almost in awe; but, alas! whatever hidden loveliness he was beginning to discover, the outward charm had left the face that had once so delighted him, and Althea had never perhaps shown to less advantage than she did now. Watching, anxiety, and suffering had robbed her of those nameless graces that had played by turns over her mobile features, and in her sombre mourning she already looked years older than when they had last met. The sight grieved, distressed, and touched him; it was something of the artist, as well as of the lover, that found expression in an involuntary cry—

"Althie," he broke out, with quite a new passion in his voice, "where is that bright mischievous being who teased me

so, and left me to row home alone? What has become of her, Althie?"

Her face lost its tension for an instant, and relaxed into a forlorn little smile.

"Do not ask after her, Andrew; she is dead. Too much sorrow has killed her."

He threw his arms about her suddenly, and drew her face down to his breast, perhaps to hide the pathetic sight from his eyes, possibly to say what he felt ashamed to say otherwise.

"Althea," he whispered close to her ear, in a strangely deprecating tone, "have you thought of just one possible way that still lies open to us—only one?"

She lifted her head in startled surprise, but he drew it down again instantly.

"Listen, then, if you do not know. Even Miss Grace admits this to be possible. You have never been in the world—the few people you met at Elm-leigh knew you better as Miss Wynton's niece than as Miss Holmes, so the name will hardly be remembered, much less connected with the one in all the newspapers. Leave this wretched Harington and all the disgrace behind you, and come up to Elm-leigh in a few days, and I will make you a Valender at once, without waiting for such a home as I intended to give you."

Althea's face was not longer to be kept hidden. "And my father, Andrew?" she asked, in a heart-stricken tone, even more hopeless than before; "and my brothers, left to me as my mother's dying charge? And all the sacred traditions of home and family? What sort of a home should I be likely to make for you, begun with selfishness such as that? Oh, my dearest, I know you did not expect this of me, even when you asked it!"

"No," he said gravely and sorrowfully, as the eagerness all left his face; "I did not think it likely. It was a forlorn hope at the best."

"Don't you see," she said, eager in her turn, as if she had

hurt him by refusing, "that a life begun together in utter selfishness could not fail to be miserable? How long would you respect me, Andrew, after taking such a step? And your love would cease just the exact moment that your respect ended. Oh, it is cruel, *cruel* to say farewell; but it is better, even so."

"Yes," he rejoined, almost inaudibly. "You are too good for me. I meant to do great things for you, but who knows how I might have failed in the attempt."

Simple words; but how much they meant! Althea understood them perfectly, and knew that one sweet page of her life was turned down that instant as certainly as if a formal written contract had been torn in pieces. But with the effacement of the lover, she had room yet in her heart for the *man*, and his present failure to rise to life's great appeal made the risk of his drifting tendencies even greater.

A strange feeling of exhaustion had come over her with his final words, and she sank in a tired sort of way on the low foot-bar of the stile against which they had stood, nerving herself for one more word.

"Are you faint?" he asked, hurriedly and anxiously.

She shook her head. "I walked fast, and feel a trifle giddy —it is nothing. But, Andrew, do you remember our talk at Elm-leigh about failures? You will not go away and be a failure? I may take the comfort of knowing you will not— Andrew?"

He looked down into the wistful face, and his lips trembled, as words of hers had had power to make them do before now, but he did not venture to touch it as he used.

"How will it be possible to be good without my blessed little Mrs. More?" he asked. And the words did not sound light, coming as they did in such sorrowful tones from lips that faltered in their utterance.

His companion, however, hardly seemed to hear them.

"Somewhere I have read," she said, "but I am too tired

and dull to remember where—that it is possible for men to rise on their dead selves to higher things. You will spare me this one bit of comfort, Andrew? For the sake of our short three-months' love—for my mother's sake, who had such faith in you, you will spare me that? I do not see how I can let you go without it."

Was it indeed the careless, nonchalant Andrew Valender of Elm-leigh memories—this man who gazed at her an instant with something struggling within him for utterance, and whose unaccustomed tears choked his voice, as he pressed raining kisses on her hands, and even on her dress? Not on her face; a great sense of unworthiness held him back, and made him feel that to touch those pathetic lips, even in his last farewell, would be almost like desecrating a shrine.

While Althea—as conscious of their altered relations as if that before-mentioned unwritten contract were lying in visible fragments at their feet—seemed to have indeed passed into another being, and, rising from her low seat, quietly put her arms about him, and pressed one long kiss upon his brow. It had a strange effect upon him, touching some deep chord in his inner being, as had none of those shy, fluttering appeals of hers in former days, which he had always returned in half-protecting, half-humouring fondness. He did not attempt to return this one; it had in it something of the mother or elder sister mourning over a weak and erring son or brother, and it soothed even while it grieved and shamed him. That one whom he was weakly deserting in the hour of her utmost need, should not only forgive him, but should be still concerned for his future, amazed and confounded him; perhaps, after this sorrowful day, when he had been brought face to face with his own inherent nothingness, he would better enter into the meaning of the "goodness that leadeth to repentance."

"Go now, Andrew dearest."

For calm as she was, Althea could no longer bear the sight of his distress, and her touch recalled him.

"Althea—my guardian angel!" he murmured brokenly, "keep one little place in your prayers for me, though undeserving."

Something checked the eager promise that rose to her lips, as she recalled her dreary doubts of the afternoon. Prayer! of what use had prayer proved in the past? Had it saved the life so lately gone—pleaded for so earnestly? Had it made Andrew strong and brave to choose the right? Other women, living in the sunshine of happy love—triumphing, perhaps, in light and petty victories over their fellows—had *these* remembered to look up and thank the Giver of all good, as she had done? If this was the way God answers prayer——. So far her thoughts had travelled, and, too truthful to say what she did not mean, Althea answered only—

"In every prayer I offer for myself you will have a share." And gently disengaging her hands, her glance fell on the now familiar diamonds, and recalled the sense of a duty still unfulfilled. "But see," she added, in a half-whisper, "we were forgetting something."

He started, and turned abruptly aside. To take back a gift so lately given seemed to him the very seal of his humiliation; who could tell but that its very monetary value might be of use in the dark days that were coming to a family with such slender resources?

"Spare me, Althea," he murmured, almost incoherently; "keep it, bury it, throw it aside—anything but give it back to me, as a symbol of a cowardice that half maddens me to think of."

After all, it was a comfort to keep it: it was a link with so much that was slipping away. Dying lips had been pressed upon it with smiles of cheer; and it was, besides, almost the only tangible proof of sweet days that already seemed to belong to another existence—so unreal they seemed: the double tie of mother and lover met in the diamonds.

"In memory of the garden of Eden, then," she answered, with a faint smile.

Was the same thought in the heart of each as they said th
last farewell, that in one sense their way was even darker
their Paradise closed behind them, because they went fo
into the cold world on separate paths? The one took
way under a cruel sense of self-disdain—half-resolved now
again to return and fling himself at Althea's feet, and f
the worst the world could do for him; restrained again
the thought of the shock every sight of those dreadful ne
paper paragraphs brought with it, and convinced he was
strong enough to play the hero. While the other, sink
down to her lowly seat once more—watching the famil
figure with straining eyes till it passed from her sight—
that she was suffering Eve's punishment without her sin.
was nothing but suffering to-day—pain brought about
another's fall; while it almost appeared as if the high go
sat serene as in Pagan days, careless if the shafts fell justly
otherwise. Surely the lovely garden had never looked so fa
nor its sunshine seemed so warm as it did to-day, when
first chill wind of the outer world had swept over it so rough
Ah, me! how hard it is, for even the best of us, to taste
blessing of the larger hope, and to realize that, for ev
Paradise Lost, a Paradise Regained is rendered possible!

CHAPTER XXIII.

CONFLICTING TIES.

"Human beings in moments of passionate reproach and denunciation are never so wholly in the right, that the person who has to wince cannot possibly protest against some unreasonableness or unfairness in their outburst."—GEORGE ELIOT (*Felix Holt*).

SEPARATE paths! Yes; not only in the same sorrow, but separate even in the manner of bearing it. Tears, strange and torturing to the man's nature, had been wrung from him in the pain of that interview on a lonely river-bank, but they did not prevent his remembering the exigencies of daily life; and when the train steamed into the quiet Harington station, Andrew Valender was ready, and took his seat with a pale, set face indeed, but with perfect self-possession.

A lively political argument was in full swing in the compartment he had unwittingly entered, and the bright animated faces of the youths filled the elder man with envy, while they half-embittered him in his present mood. Partly to shut out their skirmish, partly to hide any tell-tale traces of emotion on his own countenance, he opened his newspaper, and was soon apparently absorbed. Not really, however. The various items seemed all beside the mark to-day, and any fresh intelligence on the subject he dreaded, yet sought, was lacking in to-day's impression. Again and again his eyes wandered from the paper to the flying landscape without, and grew dreamy at the mental vision of a face pathetic in its self-forgetful

tenderness; till those glaring words, "Bank Robbery," crop ping up at every station, obliterated, for a time, the haunt ing picture.

But Althea had no train to catch—no journey to take except indeed the long blank journey of everyday existence and she who had been the stronger in the late appeal, felt al her strength slipping from her now, leaving her benumbed almost to apathy. How tired she was! How nice to si quite still on the foot-bar, and watch the river drifting slowly past her, just below! Slowly, slowly, but always moving— that was a little comfort; on and on, surely, if imperceptibly, by-and-by it would reach the great open sea, and lose its own narrow being in immensity. Althea drew a deep breath as she thought of that, and wished she had nothing more to do than just lie down on the river of life and be borne without further care or effort to the great Eternity—that holds the answer to so many perplexities—the balm for so many anguished hearts.

How sweet, for instance, to lean back with closed eyes, and listen to the gentle lap of the stream, and the whisper of the willows on the other side. Might one not almost so drift, in imagination, like the "Christian Martyr," whose picture Edmund had taught her to love? But, ah me! what was it that brought the drooping lids open with a start, that sent the shuddering glance around, as Althea sat up and listened intently? Some thing more distant than the willow-whispers came borne on the passing breeze—the babble of the brook over reedy shallows, laughing and mocking in its jubilance—

> "Men may come and men may go,
> But I go on for ever!"

And then, with a spring, her weariness all forgotten for the moment, Althea started up and fled along the slippery path up and up the narrow brook to that spot where the *Mayfly* had halted among the forget-me-nots, before she had known sorrow.

Everything was mocking her—the merry brook, the innocent

flowers—the very vision of herself in her half-defiant happiness, carolling along that path so lately—yes, even to the dreary name she had unconsciously given the place that was destined to be so literally fulfilled! *Nowhere!* yes, indeed, they might call it *Nowhere!* and of all miseries, perhaps those typified by the words *Nowhere* and *Nescience* are the most desolate and appalling.

Pandora's box of ills is undesirable enough, even with hope at the bottom. But evils *without* the blessing—it is the impossibility of supporting these that has driven many a young life to the last resource of despair.

What was to become of her? Althea did not ask this question in words; but as she stood leaning heavily against the trunk of a pollard, lifting an agonized face to the sky, her eyes as dry and tearless as her lips were dumb, a voice at her ear seemed to whisper words she had heard long ages ago—

"I would shield you all your life, if I could. There comes a time when a mother can only bid her children God-speed."

"Mother, *mother!*" broke from the poor dumb lips. And though the thought brought back afresh the sense of what she had lost, it saved her from utter collapse. Everything else seemed failing, but the memory of a mother's love—that nothing could ever rob her of. Amid change, and crime, and sorrow, and the mystery of unanswered prayer, one thing remained true and unalterable, and that saved Althea's faith from shipwreck.

She never remembered afterwards how she traversed the long mile to that new-made grave, nor how long she lay prostrate upon the sods, with a dim feeling that she had half found her mother once more, and was weeping out her grief upon her bosom. The first early stars were peeping when she left and stood at last on the threshold of home; then some one's arms came round her, and drew her in.

"Is it you, Teddy? How you startled me!"

"Althea, how *could* you? It was not kind." And in the

lips. I never thought it possible that the love of my who life would weigh as nothing against the fancy of three sho months, that collapses at the first hindrance."

"I never said so much as that, Edmund," Althea bega with faltering voice. "But oh, you cannot understand! I spoke bitterly, it was because you goaded me into it; an the one thing I will *not* bear, is to hear a word said again Andrew. You cannot understand, simply because you hav never loved."

"No," was the answer, in deep concentrated tones, tha sounded strangely on the lips of one so young. "But if have never loved, I have my ideas of honour; and, to my poo narrow notions, they seem more binding than legal right however secure. And it seems to me that a man who fails t perceive this, misses Love's supreme and grandest occasio and is dismissed by her as unworthy. Think, Althea, thin of the days when we read of the grand old deeds of th past, how our hearts burned with enthusiasm at the tales noble daring! Think of what our conceptions of the he were *then*, and remember that it is yours, not mine, that hav changed!"

"I admit that mine have changed," she said, sorrowfull "But it is because I have left cloudland, and have come dow to reality. I have done with heroes. They do not walk th sober earth; they exist only in the brains of those who kno nothing of the world."

"Quixotic brains, perhaps," was the reply, with a slight cu of the lip. "Ah, Althea, is this the Elm-leigh theory—th Valender creed? No wonder you are changed! As for me I lay no claim to the heroic; but if it had been my lot to wi the love of a true-hearted girl, I think I would not have hel it lightly. And when sorrow and bereavement fell to he share, I would have hastened to her——"

"I purposely refrained from asking Andrew," cried hi sister, eagerly.

But Edmund went on, as if he hardly heard her: "And when something more terrible touched her, when, in all the freshness of her recent loss, a great dishonour fell upon her through another's guilt, why then, Althea, it seems to me, would be the grandest chance that life could offer. I would enter the cloud with her, if she could not escape it. I would lay my own good name at her feet; and, as to any taint that clung to hers, I would wear it for her sake as I would laurels, and be thankful."

He was himself quite unconscious of the passion in his voice; and, though the listener heard it, its effect on her was the reverse of what he intended. Spite of herself, her better nature rose with him to his ideal; and it seemed to lower beside it the man who had won her love.

"I may well call you quixotic and visionary," she said, coldly. "Who acts like that out of books? Who would find it possible, however great his desire? Those who know better than you can afford to show more mercy. I would rather have mother's goodness than yours. And *she* loved Andrew; she had faith in him, without waiting for, or expecting, perfection."

"And richly he has rewarded her trust!" Edmund responded; and the very lowness of the tone gave an added weight to its bitterness. "Althea, do not couple those two names together in my hearing; it is desecration to the precious dead."

His sister's eyes gleamed like coals of fire. But she did not speak at first; when the words came, it was in that strange, slow breathlessness that always assailed her when violently agitated.

"I know a greater desecration, Edmund!—the spirit that can make no allowance, and is ready to curse another. Such a spirit makes you unworthy of a mother like ours. But, as for me, put my name beside the one you loathe and despise! Look down upon us both, in your pharisaical pride! I take my stand beside the one who has striven but has failed."

Perhaps she knew how each word was stabbing him; but, with different loves tugging at her heart-strings and almost maddening her by their inward commotions, Althea took the woman's course of upholding the weakest, even though her words cut herself as well as him at whom they were launched. In certain stages of passion there is a curious fierce pleasure in lashing a heart bound closely to one's own, even the more so that we know all the time that our own hands will be the first to bind up the wounds we have given. So now, as Edmund stood awed and spell-bound under her vindictive words, his sister, as she turned and fled upstairs at a few quick bounds, felt that if even Louise were near, to come between Edmund and herself at such a time, she would not be tolerated.

She was in a curious frame of mind: one side of her nature hating, with a sudden fierce resentment, the brother who had dared to breathe upon a name she loved; the other side yearning already in strong, passionate remorse, and recalling with a strange joy that he had no one else to turn to but herself. The altar fire of their deep affection had been trampled down for the first time in all their lives. By-and-by they would build it up anew with trembling hands, and fan it into steady flame.

But—

> "Be the day weary, or be the day long,
> At length it ringeth to evensong;"

and when this sorrowful day dragged to its close at last, Althea went to her room with at least the relief of feeling that all in the house were now aware of Mr. Valender's defection. She had been determined to close that chapter of her life by night-fall, and to have no revelations to make with a new day; so, when her father and Jack appeared, she told her tale as briefly and speedily as she could. At any other time Edmund would have done all that for her, and spared her the pain, but now, all Edmund could do was to keep out of her way as much as possible.

There was no second scene; the organist was so heart-sick already that he seemed to have little surprise left for anything, and listened in weary, despondent fashion, only relieved that his daughter bore her trouble so well; while Jack's usual freedom of speech seemed to have quite deserted him, and he crept away, in crest-fallen mood, to bed. The last hope of a good start in life seemed gone with "Lovelace," and Althea would easily have forgiven her boy-brother, if she had known that his pillow was wet with tears for his own sorrows as well as hers; but she had no thought for Jack just then.

"Miss 'Thea," began Kitty, coming to her young mistress's door just as it closed for the night. "I couldn't let you go to bed without one word. Master has just been telling me, and oh! my poor lamb, it *does* come hard upon you—you that have never known trouble. But cheer up, I say—cheer up, and wear a bold front, and let them all see you are made of something better than to be picked up, and then thrown away in that fashion! I can't think what such beings as men were meant for; for the feelin's upon feelin's they've wounded amongst them, will only be known when the housetops tell their secrets. Bless you, Miss 'Thea, my dear, it's sharp enough just at first, but you'll live to rejoice at your escape—mark my words if you don't. Keeping company is poor work, after all said and done; and where there's one faithful, there's a dozen false."

"Vacant chaff well meant for grain," was the thought that crossed Althea's mind; but inasmuch as true sympathy underlay the odd expression of it, she gathered the grain from the chaff of commonplace, and silently kissed the faithful old face before turning it out of the room. Poor Kitty! was it possible *her* feelings had been among the many sacrificed to men's flippancy, in long-ago years? The idea was so new, and, coming as it did at a moment of exhaustion, so irresistible, that Althea fell into strange hysteric laughter that almost appalled herself as she sat there in the darkness, shaking from

head to foot, and unable for some minutes to control ev
a muscle.

"Am I losing my senses?" she asked herself betwe
whiles; and then, rushing to the window, as she always did, f
relief from oppression, her eye fell upon a solitary figure ju
discernible in the garden below, and she knew well her ow
bitterness had driven Edmund there, and that he was griev
and suffering still. Althea only paused to lay aside the diamon
—the things that were done with now, except as a memor
and then, with swift but noiseless footsteps, she flitted down
his side on the dusky pathway, and flung her arm about hi
and laid her cheek against his.

"Teddy," she faltered, "people do not notice what mania
say. I was out of my senses for a little while; but see—I a
come back again. I am in my right mind."

He had no word to give her just then, or he could not utt
it; but his arms came about her, and then for a long whi
they paced the straggling pathway side by side, linked in clo
embrace, till the midnight chimes in the distance warned the
to go in. Not a word was said of Mr. Valender, but, ju
before they parted, Althea held out the hand on which t
diamonds had been wont to play so splendidly of late, wi
a gesture of strange humility. That poor little rejected han
Edmund said no word this time—words had been worse th
useless already; so he only left the touch of his lips upon t
place where the diamonds had been, and, as her father h
said, Althea was quick to read symbols and signs.

So they made anew their altar fire.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW.

"Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased?"

Macbeth.

"It is in the slow, changed life that follows the first shocks of trouble, in the time when sorrow has become stale, and day follows day in dull unexpectant sameness, and trial is a dreary routine; it is then that despair threatens; it is then that the peremptory hunger of the soul is felt, and eye and ear are strained after some unlearned secret of our existence, which shall give to endurance the nature of satisfaction."—*Mill on the Floss.*

"DAYS have their faces and their characters," and most of these, as of the human faces all around us, hold a midway place between extremes. Intensity and extremes are abnormal conditions; the world's canvas is crowded with *ordinary* figures; the vivid and picturesque in life's material are small in proportion to the sober "grounding," in the history both of the race and the individual; and we cannot skip the dull pages of our experience, as we can those of the writer who wearies us with his monotony. There is some deep, broad principle at work under all this, I suppose. So many uneventful days to bring a jubilee; so many myriads of nameless toilers to build a pyramid; so many unknown hands at this moment helping to raise the great Spiritual Temple that has been slowly rising through the ages: we have hardly reason to call anything common or unclean when we think of this.

In that stupendous piece of tapestry being wrought through

the ages of man's history—that wonderful battle-piece whereon every life that has come into being has found a place and a share—what superhuman attention to detail in its minutest parts! It is almost overpowering in its vastness and majesty, but like all things truly great and strong, it has its protecting and consoling side; just as the bald, awful mountain that seems to cleave the skies and strike terror by its immensity, has its mosses and tiny flowers on a nearer view.

So—

> "Like Euripides, the human,
> With his dropping of warm tears,
> And his touch of all things common
> Till they rise to touch the spheres,"—

we may, if we only will, gather such consolation and strength from the light God has shed upon even narrow details, in the gospel of His love, that our part in the great epic, though never so humble, may partake of the heroic.

But—for there is a great *but*—if Life is short, it is brought home to us in a hundred ways, that Art is long. Any art, to acquire even an approach to perfection, costs many years of patient application; the art of getting in touch with the Divine, and thus seeing a little into the hints of it in all true music, painting, poetry—this often takes a lifetime.

Who could blame poor Althea, for instance, if her very heart died within her at the terrible greyness of her new day, as she met its face next morning, and saw in dim perspective an endless vision of such days, fading away at last only in shadow and blackness?

Was it likely she should think just then that the homely round she was called to take up was a necessary part of that great battle-piece that would acquire its true proportions by-and-by? Not at all. She only felt the homeliness, the misery, the sordidness in all its manifold departments; and the poor "Dutch Interior" had become a sort of sorrowful symbol of her whole surroundings, just now. Music, and books, and

flowers—all these sweet alleviations had flown with the wonderful touch of Ithuriel's spear: who cared to read poems that only mocked such a present as hers?

So, no wonder that, with the dust thickening on the keys of the piano the poor "professor" never cared now to open, and gathering on the furniture that a dead hand had erstwhile brightened with flowers, life in the little house in Castle Street had changed, and was threatening to grow cheap and common, as well as its surroundings.

Althea helped Kitty in various homely details when she was asked—for Kitty spared her all she could—and groaned in spirit over darning and mending. Sometimes she fell a-dreaming, asking herself how soon her hair would begin to grow grey, like the rest of things: and between the dull, dull spaces when even thought was half asleep, wondered what Andrew was doing, and whether he ever went to the shrubbery nowadays, and if he found it haunted ground.

Thus the weeks dragged away until Arthur's trial came on; then the dulness gave place to sharp pain again, as all the details were sifted, and the news of the sentence was sent over the three kingdoms: five years was not such an immense term to live through, if it had not meant social ostracism at the end of it, but in crimes of this nature the sinner's punishment is shared by all those belonging to him, and all alike knew in what way they were involved. Edmund had been more than once the medium between the culprit and his grief-stricken family; it seemed the most natural thing to turn to Edmund, in difficulties from which others shrank; and he went about his duties with such quiet self-control, that no one guessed half of what he was enduring. "Tell my poor boy, I love him, and forgive him," poor Roy had said with streaming eyes; "but I cannot see him—he stands between me and a blessed memory. God guide his future, and the future of you all, indeed; I can see no way out of it."

Althea would like to have gone to her brother, with one

Miss Grace's colours went aloft; while the first laugh that had been heard round the breakfast-table since the mother left it rang out involuntarily.

"How well you have disguised your appreciation of Aunt Grace all these months, Jack!" his sister remarked. "Your opinion has sounded the reverse of complimentary, now and then. I suppose, if Miss Felicia were to send Teddy or me a golden apple or a silver spoon to-morrow, we should discover that you had all along looked upon 'those Elm-leigh women,' as you called them, as angels of mercy. For I observed they always went coupled together something in that fashion."

"Nothing of the sort!" was the cool reply. "They are cut out of two different bits of human fabric. The 'warranted to wear well' is the one for me. I shall try to steer clear of the other."

"Steer clear of personalities too, Jack, if you are wise. And oh! while I think of it, be advised by me, and, above all things, steer clear of politics. Beaconsfield was my rock ahead—if you want smooth sailing at Elm-leigh, give him as wide a berth as possible."

"I will roar as gently as a sucking dove," was the eager reply.

But his sister responded quickly, "No, no: *requiescat in pace* is better and safer than any roaring. Let that be your motto now."

Nothing was too hard for Jack to promise at this time. The sudden sunshine after the overwhelming cloud was almost too much for his equilibrium; but no one in the house had the heart to blame the boy if his buoyant nature was springing up again after the rain with an eagerness of which he was himself half ashamed. He always checked the cheery whistle that sheer life and spirits seemed to be once more rendering a necessary vent, and once, coming suddenly upon his father's drooping figure in the midst of such a carol, Jack broke off,

with a world of contrition in the eyes, which always so recalled his mother, and that brought the organist's hand with a strange tenderness within his own.

"Don't look like that, boy, as if you had been doing wrong. Such music does me good—it is youth and nature."

"Daddy," was the eager, wistful reply, "why not let us have some of *your* music again? Oh, do play to us to-night, like you used; this once, before I go! It seems like our native air—part of the home atmosphere, and we can't even talk at our ease without the old rhythms going. Do, daddy."

But the father only shook his head wearily; and when the time came to say farewell, the two natures, so like each other, fairly gave way, and Jack in his turn was experiencing the truth of Louise's words, that unalloyed happiness is not to be had in this life. He had always thought Dick Whittington, going to London to make his fortune, the most enviable of mortals—London! the very name was one of magic and mystery—and now——. Ah! we don't read that old Mr. Whittington was such a jewel of a father as this one, or that Dick had just lost his mother, or that his only sister was such a brick as Al, whom he was leaving, a grieved and forsaken woman.

But, oh, horror! to go to the station with red eyes!

"Good-bye, daddy, dear old man!" he gasped, half choked with his conflicting feelings.

The "professor" only detained him to say, "Jack, I have lost one son whom I trusted as my own life, and it shakes my faith in my own flesh and blood. You must promise me that, whatever scrapes you get into—even the smallest—you will tell Althea; for a lad will not go far wrong who shows his sister all his life. And if you want money——"

"Hush, daddy dear! I promise you all you ask. But is not Aunt Grace going to pay the piper? What should I want with money?"

"If you want money," pursued his father even more distinctly

than before—"for lads find many wants in London they never dreamed of before—avoid the smallest debt, if you would not bring me to the grave. Be open with us, and, if need be, I will sell my very clothes ere you shall go astray."

And so, with an April face and mingled feelings, this tall young Benjamin of the family went out to seek his fortune—Edmund and Althea seeing him off, in his third-class compartment, with fond, but heavy hearts; for if he satisfied his relatives, he would not return home again for many a long month, and much of the old home history would come to an end with Jack's departure.

"It is *my* turn to warn you to come back just as you go, dear boy," said his sister, with a forlorn little smile, remembering how much had happened since that advice had been given to *her*.

"Nonsense," put in Edmund, quickly; "he'll come back a big man, with pronounced ideas on the cut of his waistcoats a social martyr who figures at afternoon tea when he goes to visit his aunts in the country. If he could stoop to our Debating Society when he pays Harington a visit, I should not wonder if he did not argue on——"

"Hush, Teddy," frowned Althea, warningly. "Jack is going to forget the very existence of debating societies; they are reefs and shoals that might cost him dear. *Requiescant in pace* is our motto now."

The life in Castle Street settled down into blankness and apathy again after the new break. Edmund went back to his books and plans; the organist to his music lessons; and Althea to her round among the petty details, untouched by beauty unsoftened by blessing,—only roused occasionally by the thought that she must begin to make some provision for her future, if it were possible to do so without leaving home. She had already altered very much since her troubles; the little niceties of detail in personal attire had always been somewhat of a bore to her, even in her brightest days, so that it was not

wonder they were neglected now. Louise had used to say that Althea required a lady's-maid to keep her trim and dainty, and would often herself see to tuckers and finishes, while her cousin was curled up comfortably with a book, or wandering with the boys by the river. Nowadays, with no Louise to spur her, nobody—it seemed to her—to notice how she went, Althea did not shine as a household goddess. The sombre mourning that so ill became her had already lost its first freshness, and the face that used to be such a study to Andrew Valender in its rapid play, was now seldom lighted by a passing smile.

She was indeed reading hard, stern prose, and in the gloomy bitterness of grief preferred dreaming over past happiness, or making pensive calculations as to future bread-winning, to alleviating trouble by the books that had once delighted her. Not that she was idle, indeed; Althea's hands were seldom empty, even when her heart ached: but trouble was telling on her fast; and in those first months Edmund could seldom tempt her from the shelter of home.

Visitors had always been rare in Castle Street, except in Louise's time, so that they were hardly missed, as they would otherwise have been : and the most faithful of these visitors, Mr. Thorpe, having tried ineffectually to obtain an interview, found Miss Holmes was always engaged, or too unwell to see him. So he gave up at length, and only looked in when her father was likely to be at home; for poor Roy was more appreciative, and sympathy touched him, from what quarter soever it might come.

Althea, on the contrary, was all prickles just now, and, in her foolish weakness, felt as if pity would be an insult to that poor torn heart of hers, and that she could not be approached on the subject of any of her troubles without writhing inwardly. What could Mr. Thorpe know of such wounds as hers?

In those bright, youthful days, seemingly so long ago, she had given him a wide berth, always looking upon him in the

light of a large insidious spider, who would entrap un flies into the meshes of parish work; and this girl, with head full of cloudland fancies, and her long limbs rejo in the full play of sunshine and wind, had had a horr guilds and rules. And now, after keeping him at arm's le so long, was it likely he could do much for a *convict's si* For that was the hard name by which she was learnin know herself in these bitter, rebellious days.

"I don't want to be preached to," she had replied, Kitty had remonstrated with her young mistress for refusi see the Vicar. "I don't want spiritual or temporal do for such sorrows as mine. A blow on the hills will d more good by-and-by."

And yet it was full six weeks before Althea set off tc what Nature could do for her once more; and the dull, December day looked uninviting enough, as she passed thr Castle Street. Cold skies were nothing, however, comp to cold or inquisitive faces, and this first solitary ra brought home forcibly to the over-sensitive girl how cha life had become. She did not know how little her expression, in its set and almost stern withdrawal, in sympathy, or realize that she had cased herself in a speci mental armour, before facing the Harington world: she just in that painful attitude of mind that almost challe attack, and in such a mood, one is seldom long withc real or imaginary grievance.

Those two former friends of Louise's, for instance, w she met by the church. Women can punish each other a look that is as cruel as a lash, but it was just possible Althea's forbidding face had something to do with the bow she received. One of them had, indeed, made an inst pause, but her companion drew her on: she had never kr much of Miss Annesley's cousin—why should she begin of all times in the world? Windows have eyes, and have ears, very sharp ones in quiet country towns, and

moral courage that will run the gauntlet of these, in even so small a matter as parleying with the unfashionable, is far too rare.

So the smile that at such a time might have carried a breath of balm was withheld, and the friends pursued their way to wonder anew what would become of that poor thing, and why she did not go out to Calcutta to escape the disgrace that had fallen upon her family—though, to be sure, perhaps the Conways would rather avoid the connection.

And Althea, with white, hard face and quivering nerves, was walking fast and blindly, she hardly knew whither, except that it was a necessity to get away from human eyes. An old instinct led her to the meadow pathway, and, heedless of wet grass that soaked her shoes and draggled her skirts, she was soon speeding as for her life by the familiar river-side, feeling the cold raw wind almost a relief as it blew strongly in her face. Let it buffet as it would, it was an old friend of her childhood, with no sinister meaning under its rough handling: let it bend her as it did the swaying branches—it did her good, and relieved the first oppression of those bands that were strangling the very life within her. Up here by the lonely brook, where the wind whistled weirdly among the naked boughs, how secluded it was from prying eyes! What a relief, a rest, to abandon herself to the wild music and play, till she could half fancy herself a part of the inanimate nature whose voice she had loved so long.

Hark at the brook! Was that the merry little babbling stream that had made such blithe music for her on that summer night? How it tossed, and danced, and swirled along to-day, with something almost of reckless joy in its strength and volume.

Only to fancy—one false step in this slippery grass, and—the perplexing knot of life cut at once: all its misery over, to awake out of the moment's pang and find her mother once more!

Why had not her foot slipped just now in that rapid fligh
By this time she and Mamsey might have been face to face! . .
How the brook laughed, and rushed over the stones yonde
How the wind sobbed overhead, like a funeral hymn! . .
Nature had always been kind—our great Mother, as the poe
called her. Well, then, might we not trust a mother with ou
selves and our destiny? If a little slip of the foot would launc
one innocently into the Unknown, would it be a sin to l
down calmly in the lap of Nature, and let her do her worst,
best? Unanswered prayers were too dreadful: this would l
an appeal that could brook no delay or evasion. Natu
could not help but answer *then*.

Althea sprang up suddenly, shuddering from head to foo
as a feeling of awful loneliness fell upon her that was not bo
of the solitude around. It seemed to her, as she struggle
blindly back to the open (but carefully, lest her footho
should be lost), that Nature *was* answering her already—di
missing her, as out of harmony with her sweet teaching; an
till she repented, and accepted her duty, ready neither t
receive nor to yield the old sweet confidences.

Was this the way a soul fared that left its duties unfulfille
that shut itself away from the sympathy and love of its fellows

Althea saw no more cold or wondering glances on her wa
home—saw only the Vicar's face as, pausing at his own doo
he turned in astonishment at the touch of her urgent hand an
the sound of tones that conveyed far more than the mere word

"Mr. Thorpe, I want you! You must help me."

People do not wait to choose courteous phrases when the
are drowning, and though Althea had had no thought
seeking the Vicar, she eagerly caught at this opportunity
speaking to him. He saw it was no common matter that ha
brought this girl to his side, a girl whom he had vainly soug
to reach so long, and he asked no tormenting questions ti
she was ensconced by the cheerful study fire. He noted th
strained expression of the brown eyes—the intense pallor

"Mr. Thorpe, I want you! You must help me."—*p.* 310.

her cheek—the exhaustion with which she almost fell into the depths of the great chair he wheeled forward. Softly touching the bell, he had a cup of fragrant tea placed at her side, before she had even noticed the order, in the semi-consciousness of her state.

"Mr. Thorpe," Althea began then, opening her heavy eyes, "you must not be kind to me. You do not know, yet. When I have told you, I hardly even dare think you will give me what I ask—I am so undeserving."

"Suppose you have that cup of tea first," was the quiet reply, as the Vicar stood before her on the hearth, busying himself with notes and papers, to give her time. "Mrs. Thorpe will be coming in soon, and you won't be ready to talk to her, and I have been wanting so much to see you for a long time. That's right—the colour is coming back a little. Now tell me where you have been, to frighten yourself so."

He spoke soothingly, as he would to a young child, but Althea rose out of the luxurious chair, and stood beside him with grave averted eyes. He scarcely seemed to her a father-confessor; but still, the effort of confession was so great that, but for her yearning to get back to help and peace, she would scarcely have made it.

"Never mind where you have been," he began.

But Althea stopped him with a gesture. "I have gone from bad to worse," she said, speaking low and fast. "Life has been too hard for me. It was trouble upon trouble, with no end or meaning in it, that I could see. I gave up struggling with it weeks ago, and this afternoon, as I walked by the river, all alone——" There was no need to finish the sentence in words, for the shudder that ran through her was more eloquent than speech.

There is something in the touch of a strong, warm, human hand that reaches the heart sometimes better than any language of the lips, and Althea, who had been expecting some stern rebuke at the very least, felt a strange thrill of

comfort in the quiet clasp; it seemed to reach icy depths of loneliness, and lay an arresting power on a drifting life.

"But—but, have you no word of blame for me?" she asked, looking up at her new friend in wonder, from the low chair to which he had gently restored her; for the silence and the grave tenderness of his face awed her far more than any homily could have done.

"Was it Christ's way, to blame?" was the low reply. "Think a moment. Think, when the Prodigal came home if his father met him with reproaches? And the woman who came in penitence to wash His feet—and that other hapless woman of the Gospel story—how were they received? I always think that 'Neither do I condemn thee' must have broken, even while it melted, a sinner's heart."

It seemed like to break this one; for Althea, who hated above all things to betray emotion to a stranger, could no longer restrain her sobs. All the misery of the past weeks—all her doubts about unanswered prayer—all her blind bitterness and self-seclusion, found relief, at last, in those raining tears; and her companion, seeing they would help her, did not attempt to check them.

"You have been lonely, and heart-sick, and tempted," he went on, still in that low soothing tone; "and at such times the whisper that came to Job is too sadly familiar to poor humanity: 'Curse God, and die.' We do not put it in such strong expression; we may be very far from cursing, even in thought: but to the soul, thus brought face to face with the great mystery and riddle of life, there can be no rest until it has at least gained some glimpse of its solution. Only a glimpse, it may be; for the full unfolding can hardly take place in this life: but to have found the first clue is something—is much. Nay, to those who have long struggled with that first link, it is *everything*."

The Vicar seemed to be speaking the last words more to himself than to his companion, and it gave her courage to

remove her hands from her face and sit erect once again. It seemed to her as if she, who had thought herself alone in her troubles, found a new and mighty fellowship of which she had not dreamed.

"I had no idea there was so much trouble in the world," she said, thoughtfully. "I thought some new and strange thing had happened to myself. And this great mystery you spoke of—is it Sorrow? Oh, it *is* a mystery why the innocent should suffer for the guilty; why any sorrow should come, in fact, that we do not sow for ourselves."

"It *is* a mystery," he replied, and Althea, who had expected to be "preached to," marvelled at the naturalness of the reply. It sounded as though he had puzzled over it as much as herself—if indeed he were not puzzling now; for as he sat looking into the firelight, it was almost as easy to talk to him as to Edmund.

"Yes, there is much of mystery," he went on. "There is that puzzle about the existence of evil, on which so many have theorized with small results. And sin, sorrow, and death—the results of evil—are all mysteries; but it seems to me, one attitude, and one alone, has proved the 'Open, Sesame' to anything beyond. It held good with Chaldean Abraham, with Arabian Job, and Hebrew David: it is one of the very watch-words of the Mahometans: it is the 'open secret' of the Christian religion. You know what I mean."

"Submission," responded Althea, faintly.

"Submission. Not passive endurance alone, but that faith in the very character of God that trusts in the thick darkness, saying with Mahomet, '*Islam*,'—we must submit: with Job, 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him;' with a Higher than either, 'Not my will, but Thine.' These, and such as these, are the only true answers; though, unhappily, far other ones are given daily, we know too well."

"What answers, Mr. Thorpe?" asked Althea, breathlessly.

"Many others. The coward, for instance, will rashly cut

a knot he has not the courage to undo—with what results, it is not given us in this world to discover. Another, hardly less cowardly, will drown sorrow in stupefaction, or gaiety, or sin—also with results of their own. Others, and by far the greater number, will go on bearing their weight of care, as the driven cattle bear their burdens, simply from necessity, with hardly a glimpse of a more excellent way."

He felt the great brown eyes were asking for more, and yet, so keen was his insight, that it seemed as if he knew she had shrunk from "preaching," and was to be met on different ground to some. Besides, there is a certain fellowship in sorrow; it is sweeter and easier to share with others what we have ourselves found good, than to bid them go to a land of which we know nothing, in search of balm.

"I have been like those last," murmured Althea; "and, oh, it is heavy walking! But necessity has no law."

The Vicar had turned to his bookshelves as he last spoke, and now faced round upon her from the library steps with a brightening glance, and the next moment took a seat beside her, with a small brown volume open in his hand.

"You are a lover of books, I have heard," he said, with a smile, "and perhaps this is long since familiar; if so, I am sure you will feel with me that it bears repetition. Listen a moment. 'It has ever been held the highest wisdom for a man not merely to submit to Necessity—Necessity will make him submit—but to know and believe well that the stern thing that Necessity has ordered was the wisest, the best, the thing wanted there. To cease his frantic pretension of scanning this great God's world in his small fraction of a brain; to know that it had verily, though deep beyond his soundings, a just Law; that the soul of it was Good; that his part in it was to conform to the Law of the Whole; and in devout silence follow that; not questioningly—obeying it as unquestionable. A man is on the road to sure conquest precisely when he joins himself to the great, deep Law of the World; . . . he is victorious

while he co-operates with that great central Law: not victorious otherwise. . . . That our whole strength lies in resigned submission to God, whatever He do to us. That the thing He sends to us, were it death, or worse than death, shall be good, shall be best: we resign ourselves to God.' Dear Miss Holmes," the Vicar added, pausing with his finger in the book, "those are not my words, but I feel their truth, and so do you. You follow me, I plainly see."

"Yes, I follow," said Althea, with a deep breath. Something of the look had come into her eyes that had used to startle her mother by its inward light when Edmund read aloud in the old days, but now it died out more suddenly than it had dawned. "I follow, as far as seeing goes," she said, sadly; "but that is nothing, if I have no strength for more. It is like a lovely mirage in the desert. It is a noble idea, but too high, too grand, for a weak woman like me. *Devout silence* indeed! Oh, Mr. Thorpe! when my very heart is breaking."

He knew what she meant. He had seen her in all her girlish glee with Andrew Valender that summer evening, and had heard how things had gone since, and his heart was deeply touched.

"My child," he said, softly and earnestly, "if devout silence precludes a cry, such an idea may mould a stoic, but not a human hero, which means a conqueror. What about David's cries and tears over the dying child he yearned to keep? Nay, think of Gethsemane, and that a struggle came before victory even *there*. That thought has often comforted me."

Althea had a strange new feeling of fellowship, at that moment, with the man she had always hitherto avoided as unsympathetic. She had heard of two little lives blossoming in the Vicar's home years ago, and of a week when they had passed away almost together, and had left a childless hearth behind; and she guessed of what he was thinking now, though she did not dare to intrude until he looked up of his own accord.

"No," he went on, "cries and struggles are no evidence of a lack of submission; but, as we were reading, to join himself to that great Law we see to be so glorious, a man must first get upon the track. Once do that, and sooner or later he will begin to see 'the distant gates of Eden gleam.'"

His listener startled at the last words as a hunter at the sound of the horn.

"Do *you* read poetry?" she asked, in answer to his inquiring look.

And there was such *naïveté* in the straightforward surprise of the question that Mr. Thorpe smiled involuntarily.

"I am afraid I have impressed you as a very prosaic individual," he answered.

Althea hastily begged pardon, feeling that this was one of the slips that Louise had used to correct in her with such deep concern.

"*You* love poetry, I well know," was the Vicar's comment; "and I doubt not you will find many and many a finger-post by the way, written in letters of gold, when once your feet are upon the road again."

"I have always longed to get up high," murmured Althea, sadly; "I have always so loved goodness. Until my troubles came, I almost thought I was a little bit good myself. But how self-deceived!"

"A person has not necessarily been all wrong who has lost his way for a little while," was the gentle answer. "A longing for purer air and clearer vision is often a prophecy of its fulfilment. If those poets that you love so well have found an echo in your own breast, they will lead you higher, if you will let them. For *they*, too, have longed for goodness; they have joined themselves to the great Law of the World; and thus putting their feet on one after another of the great mountain ledges, they turn to lend a hand to those just below them in the track. What is it one of them tells us?

"'Only those are crowned and sainted
Who with grief have been acquainted,
Making nations nobler, freer.'"

There was silence after this for some time, Althea thinking many things, and the Vicar leaving her to find her own way back to speech when and as she chose. Things were beginning to adjust themselves in quite a new light to her wondering mind. Mr. Thorpe's tones were natural enough to her ears in the old, old church, rising and falling in the familiar Liturgy. They were a part, with the equally familiar white surplice and the notes of the organ, of a sort of ecclesiastical *régime*. But to hear stanzas of Longfellow in that same rich, melodious voice, quite apart from its usual accompaniments, seemed somehow to widen her view considerably. If clergymen were not the parish machines she had vaguely imagined them, but were in touch (some of them) with the life of the race—the growing, developing life of to-day—the aspect of many things was changed. The poets and historians, and essayists whom she had used to look upon as quite a weekday company, seemed to take a different place, and to stand on the same platform with "the goodly fellowship of the prophets" and "the Holy Church throughout all the world," that had hitherto been associated only with Sunday and the old monuments of the departed Haringtonians.

Yes: the difference was surely only one of degree and not of kind, and Althea woke up from her reverie with a long-drawn breath.

"It made me think of 'the great cloud of witnesses,'" she said, "when you repeated those lines."

"Did it?" he responded quickly, with a bright look. "I have often thought the same. Tasso, dying after a life of accumulated sorrows—pride and over-sensitiveness chastened and purified through trial; Dante, defeated and exiled, and tasting the bitter bread of dependence through long years; Milton, seeing visions that heedless eyes open to the light of

day would hardly have perceived—nay, there is no need to prolong the list. You must have seen for yourself how the great undertone of sorrow is more or less audible in all who have had any message worth delivering; and that he who bears the precious seed commonly goes forth weeping."

Another pause, broken at length by the clock striking six, that effectually roused Althea from her reverie.

"Mr. Thorpe," she cried, with painful compunction, "how sorry and ashamed I am! As if your time were not sufficiently taken up, I must waste it at this unseasonable hour. I believe I was dimly expecting Mrs. Thorpe, and then lost myself in the subject of the moment. If she were not behind time, too, I should never forgive myself."

"Mrs. Thorpe has already come in," replied the Vicar, with a pleasant smile. "She looked in upon us some time ago, but found we were too busy to be interrupted just then, and is, I expect, awaiting us this moment, in the drawing-room. Nay, do not be so disquieted, or talk of *wasted* time. I do not consider mine is, at any rate."

A grateful look was his only answer, for, as she rose and stood buttoning her gloves, a terrible qualm had seized the girl at the remembrance of red eyes, dishevelled hair, and—horror upon horror!—splashed and draggled skirts. To go into the drawing-room in such a plight was a moral impossibility, and her crimsoning cheeks would have annoyed Miss Felicia had she been present; for Althea's sudden changes of manner and fits of overwhelming confusion had always embarrassed the old lady, betraying as they did such a lamentable want of tone. There are a few people, happily, however, to whom tone is not absolutely essential to interest, and Mr. Thorpe was one of them. It was not detail of appearance or manner that made his eye linger with a certain critical interest on this young parishioner of his—a stranger for so long; and as she turned to the door he detained her yet a moment.

"You will not sink again to the dull level of a slave?" he

asked earnestly. "If I read you aright, you will face this great mystery of which we spoke in the only attitude that is possible if any higher ground is to be reached? You will recognize the mere gift of existence as too great in its responsibilities to admit of any choice but the best?"

"I recognize it," was the sorrowful reply. "Just now, while you speak, it seems possible enough. But oh, things will grow dark again! Life is so sad—so strange, to what I had expected."

"It *is* sad, and strange," the Vicar rejoined. "We will not blink that fact for a moment. And yet, my child—for to my fifty years you are still almost a child—I hardly know whether to pity or to well-nigh envy you; it is such an honour, such a wonderful possibility! Cheap and easy lives for common-place, low-level natures: something higher is reserved for you."

"And if I should miss it?" Althea murmured, unconsciously tightening her clasp of the hand that held her own.

"It is *lest* you should, that I trust you to take that first step and get upon the track at once. Give that weak, wavering will into Hands that have been proved trustworthy. One who Himself rose to life's great occasion through acquiescence in a Higher Will, is not likely to misunderstand a cry of pain, or the sigh of a heart that aches."

"'Our wills are ours to make them Thine,'" thought Althea; and, scarcely above a whisper, she answered, "It shall be even as you wish."

She withdrew her hand upon this, having almost forgotten the clergyman in the fellow-pilgrim on life's highway, beckoning her on to what he had himself gained before her.

"But even now you have not told me what favour it was you so wished me to grant," the Vicar asked.

He evidently thought there was no time like time present, and that so uncertain a visitor might not easily be encountered again.

Althea turned at once. "I was forgetting all about that. It was only," she began hesitatingly, "that I wanted escape

from myself and the aimlessness of the present. I alwa dreaded parish work—I dread it now, in fact; but anythi is better than the horror of this afternoon. If you could gi me any work, however dull, I will take it, rather than live I have been doing of late."

The Vicar thought of the long-limbed young hoyden he h seen taking the hurdle with such earnestness not so long ag and the humility of the present appeal had a strange path for him. It would have seemed like harnessing a zebra or antelope to a common plough; but it was not this that ma him pause. He hesitated a few seconds, and then, taking one of the memoranda that lay piled on the study-table, glanced at Althea with a face of most comic wistfulness.

"How is it that life's good things have such a knack coming out of season?" he asked with a funny smile. "Wh we are children, we think unlimited sugar-plums the height human enjoyment; but when they are at our disposal the ta has left us. Look at these vacancies now: here, and he and here, and how my fingers itch to put your name down one of them! Yet now, when I have the chance, I am afra to take it."

Althea looked perplexed indeed. If this guild-loving Vic hesitated to accept her help, it could only point to mc sorrowful unfitness on her part; and yet——

"I am *afraid* to take it," he went on, breaking in upon h meditations. "I have seen more of your father lately; I ha met that grave brother of yours occasionally, whose face h touched me almost as much, in its intense thoughtfulnes and to take daughter and sister away from home, and fill h head and hands with other duties, might be sheer robbery such a time. I fear—I fear I must counsel you to wait."

"And do nothing?" asked his visitor, in a tone of d appointment.

"And do everything, say rather," he replied cheeri "Never fear that I shall let you be idle. Church work

wide and deep, extending beyond the limits of any guilds; and, for the present, nothing seems to me of such moment as a bereaved home. Do your best there for the time being, and by-and-by I will come with a clear conscience and ask for help."

So Althea made her excuse to Mrs. Thorpe, and went her way homewards through the dark streets, in fresh repentance at her terrible unpunctuality, but with a different face to that with which she had set out. Edmund was looking out for her, and everything was comfortless, just as on that last occasion when she had so alarmed him by her long delay; but this time there was a tinge of the old hopefulness in the sister's glance as she linked her arm in his, and led him back across the threshold.

"I have a puzzle for you," she said, in answer to his inquiring look. "See if you can guess it while I go away and change my skirts. Did you ever know a big black spider actually let a fly go unharmed out of his toils?—after spreading them for months past too? If you have not guessed by the time I come down, you shall hear all about it."

mood; and something in the despondent brow made her dr
nearer, as she asked—

"What is it you have most at heart, then, Edmund?"

"It is a selfish shame to burden you with it, Al," was t
reluctant answer, after a long pause. "I did mean to ke
this all to myself, but we have a knack of getting at ea
other's secrets somehow, and perhaps it is best between us tw
What lies upon me like an incubus is the thought of Arthu
future, after these years have expired. Think, Althea, wh
should you say would be the first resort of a man, witho
name or character, turned adrift upon a world that disown
him—a man, young as Arthur will still be, and not harden
in crime, but anxious for a future?"

"I should think he would go abroad," was the reply, aft
a thoughtful pause.

Edmund assented eagerly. "It will be his first thoug
he said; "almost his sole chance of anything like respect
bility. But to go abroad wants ready money—to begin li
afresh requires capital. Oh, Althea! talk of unskilled labo
indeed; I can't bear to think of Arthur turned adrift on fre
soil, without even the means of subsistence."

The sudden sense of the situation made Althea's face flus
and her heart beat quickly, as she unconsciously crushed h
work in her hands; till Edmund, seeing the danger, prompt
rescued the dainty little garment, and placed it careful
aside.

"Goodness gracious, child!" he cried, "is that the way yo
'gentlewomen' treat your orders? Because, if so, I fan
your chances of future patronage are small."

But Althea was too excited to heed such banter ju
then.

"Edmund," she cried, "you were born with a double sha
of brains, I verily believe; what was left out of my cor
position fell to you. How else is it that I can never origina
anything? But, oh, how thankful I am there is some or

like you to lead! And now, while Daddy is out, we will talk things over. Of *course* I shall be partner in this new idea, and, of *course*, my own bread-winning will wait till Arthur is provided for; meantime, we will leave no stone unturned to make him a purse against the five years are over."

"I can't bear to see you grinding, though, Al. I wanted to do that for myself, but, until this year is expired, I am feeling tied and bound. Wait till I can get a start, and then we will begin together, if it must be so."

"Wait!" cried Althea eagerly, with a crimson spot in her cheeks, and a new light coming back to her eyes. "Wait—and be kept out of what will be to me like life, once again? And then come in with my shillings, while you are putting pounds into this new concern of which we are to be joint proprietors? The unskilled must look about them, and gain a good start, if they don't mean to be sleeping partners."

She did not, that was certain. Short sleep had Althea that night; but it was hopeful eagerness, not anxiety, that kept her brain working, and she began to see the wisdom of Mr. Thorpe in advising her to wait before plunging into Church work. He might well say Church work was wide and deep, reaching beyond the guilds: at that moment the enthusiastic girl felt that an archdeaconry would be only a fitting acknowledgment of such width of view as the Vicar had evinced.

"As Ruskin says, 'The highest law of the universe, and the other name of life, is *help*,'" she whispered to herself, "and by hook or by crook I will help Arthur."

"Daddy," said Althea, later on in the day, as her father was getting into his Inverness, "do you know, I am coming to meet you at the church, to have an organ lesson just before practice. Tell me you will be very patient, if I try my best."

"An organ lesson? What's in the wind now?" asked the "professor," turning sharply round, with his deep collar half turned up. "You know I wanted to teach you years ago, when you left school, and you never had patience to go on.

But music is not to be taken up and put off again, like a spencer."

"No, indeed, daddy—whatever a spencer may be," was astonishingly meek reply. "But though music will never own me as a priestess, she might be prevailed on to ac me as a handmaid. Do let me try, father! I am real earnest."

He looked hard at her for a moment, half suspicious this was some innocent plot got up to "interest" him, no bird likes to feel the salt on his tail, however huma tendered.

"Listen, child," he said. "Is this new freak taken u your sake, or for mine? Because I have no time to t away on whims and fancies."

"For mine, father, *indeed*. I want to improve my m though I do not love it as you do. I want to be doing s thing useful, and I have an eye to Overton church at the vacancy. You know you have been wanted at two service once, very often. I mean to be ready for future emergenc

"You talk as if it were a mere A.B.C.," was the indig comment.

But Althea's answer was irresistible. "Patience and severance, daddy. I challenge *you* to the first, and pl myself to the second, and even an organ will bend b these! Besides, I learnt the A.B.C. part long ago; greater mysteries we have to penetrate to-day."

But the "professor's" part of the bargain seemed destine come short, almost at the outset, and, persevering as the was determined to be, it was a trying time. She knew she never been in sympathy with his passion for music, so allowance must be made for what looked indeed like a of her own; she recognized, too, that sorrow was telling temper naturally quick, though tender: but she hardly rea how her unwonted presence recalled the other Althea, those never-to-be-forgotten music lessons.

So she struggled painfully on, and her father fretted and fumed, while the organ lamented.

"Bah!" he cried, as another false chord set all his teeth on edge with a shiver, "better give up, and spare the time of us both. You will never make a St. Cecilia!"

The very urgency of the case made the words sting, more than the personal allusion; and it was something of the spitfire of former days that retorted, indignantly—

"I don't want to make one, if I could! Saint Cecilia, indeed! In Castle Street! You may be thankful you have some one to keep house for you, instead of sitting all day before an organ, crowned with roses."

A spasmodic giggle from the back of the instrument recalled both the belligerents to a sense of Tim Trueman's presence, and to the indecorum of squabbling in a sacred building: they stopped short, and looked each other in the eyes with secret shamefaced laughter.

"We are forgetting our contract," said the "professor;" then, with sudden mildness, "proceed, Saint Cecilia."

"With all my heart, Abt Vogler," was the prompt rejoinder. So to Tim's disappointment no farther sparring took place, eagerly as he listened for it; and, notwithstanding repeated failures, Althea would not give in until the first arrivals for the practice warned her to depart.

Courageous as she had been over her music lesson, however, it was with a thoughtful face that she turned into the dark avenue, wet with a misty rain. Her chances of success in earning money seemed smaller than they had before, and the thought of Mrs. Blakeney's terrible array of distressed gentlewomen was not exhilarating at such a moment.

"So many wanting money, and so little to be made," she sighed, "except for the happy few who are talented, or well equipped for competition by years of careful training. Oh, poor Arthur! if your chance rested alone upon me!"

"But oh! comforting thought," she sighed again, with a

deep breath, "if I cannot be a hare in the race of life, I w
at least be a tortoise, and by little and little win somethin
however small.

"'We have not wings—we cannot soar,
But we have feet to scale and climb.'

Oh yes! and, God helping me, climb I will."

So, next day, the moment she was free, Althea took th
church keys and went in search of Tim, only to find she ha
forgotten that that young gentleman's education not being y
completed, he would not be at her service for some time, an
that she had had a lost journey.

"My head never will save my steps," she lamented to herse
as she hurried home; "as if time were not precious enoug
I must waste it in fruitless errands."

But she redeemed what she could of it by sitting down t
work at her little frock, while waiting to secure her sma
cavalier. Kitty, passing in and out occasionally, and seei
the eager industry, silently marvelled at these changes an
developments, and wondered how long this stage of proceedin
would last.

"By little and little." That was one of Althea's favouri
mottoes this year, and it often cheered her in those lon
solitary hours in the organ chamber, where she was trying s
hard to improve before asking her father for further help. Sh
recognized perfectly that she would never be a St. Cecili
though she tried her very hardest; the love of music was n
innate, but other love animated flagging resolution, and th
thought of Arthur acted like a charm. The grand old maste
of harmony might never perhaps inspire her as did the maste
of song; they did not lean to her as the poets did, becau
they did not find the like answering echo in her heart: bu
one can scarcely wait humbly and perseveringly in the ant
chambers of art, without winning some token of the Presenc
to bear away. The inner secret, the unfolding rapture, is f
the votaries, but the faithful handmaids do not go quite emp

away. This girl did not, anyway. Help for Arthur was future —indefinite and uncertain, at the best; but she had present recompense, though hardly conscious of it at the time.

Father and daughter drew, naturally, closer together in their common pursuit, as Althea improved. Mr. Holmes could not withhold his admiration of the steady perseverance that seemed to promise so little; and in the interest of teaching and training, something of his old pleasure was gradually returning. Besides, he had a secret all his own—a hint of future hope that he was not allowed to disclose yet, even to his children. Louise had taken the right course when she sent that whisper from a far-off home, of a possible little passenger one day, in a homeward bound ship. "It is one of the worst trials of life in India," she wrote; "but *if* it be so, if my earliest days are to be lived again in another little life, there is no one in the world to whom I would sooner trust it than to Uncle Roy. For I have proved his care of my own helplessness, and though I have ill repaid such devotion, it may be he will yet find his reward in a new generation."

So, while the father had one secret all to himself, his children kept the other for the present, and would sadden him by no dark thoughts of Arthur's difficulties. As I said, Althea did not labour in vain, even should no current coin be forthcoming for her pains. Her own character was gaining in strength and firmness day by day, and the high purpose to which she had pledged herself was like a breath of mountain air, calling her ever upwards to a higher standing-ground. Gradually other people began to hear of poor Holmes's children, and the brave efforts they were making to retrieve a past terrible error; and some hearts were softened, while all were touched with a sense of respect, and one or two began to plan possible help, if it could be rendered secretly.

Everybody seemed to find out, just at that time, that they had always liked poor Holmes himself: he had had such a genial, courteous manner, and such an old-world simplicity of

character till his troubles came. And one member of t
corporation, to whom the Vicar happened to be speakir
thought it was quite time they got up a purse for him, for
had been a pitiful shame to let him struggle on alone, so lor
Another opined, on hearing the proposal, that the offer of
purse would be almost as bad as a blow in the face to t
organist and his family, who had "notions of their own," a
had always been peculiar; so, after due deliberation, the res
was a considerable increase of salary, accompanied by
illuminated address. This testimonial to his merits and
fellow-townsmen's appreciation went to Roy's very heart, a
affected him more than the substantial part; and the propos
of the testimonial would have rejoiced could he have look
in on the little domestic picture on the day of the surpri
And further, the good people of Harington seemed to wake
at once to the refining influence of music; and the organ
was in request at more private lessons and social and pub
sol-fa classes that winter than he had ever been befo
While Althea, whose eye, as she had said, was on Overt
Church, where a vacancy seemed probable before long, w
taken by surprise at finding an application unnecessary wh
the looked-for moment arrived, for some one had forestalled h

"I have just been offered Overton," said her father, comi
in one day with a glow of pleasurable excitement on his fa
"It is a sort of tenure to sub-let at pleasure, if I can find a
suitable person to put in possession. You are not great
voluntaries, but I think you might stumble through a f
chants for village voices by this time. Will you accept it, Al

Althea looked up brightly, and her cheeks reflected the gl
on her father's face; she knew he was just delighted, as w
as herself.

"A bone is a bone to a hungry dog, though it is thrown
his head," she answered. "Yes, sir, if you really dispose
enlist my doubtful services: and I will try not to exasper
the poor villagers more than I can help."

"You will," he cried eagerly; "that's right—I am glad. The picking of this said bone won't be much; but, dear me! if it won't make you 'walk in silk attire,' it will buy gloves and knick-knacks such as women love."

The brother's and sister's eyes met for an instant, in a glance of mutual understanding.

"Or a new spencer, perhaps, daddy," Althea suggested, meekly.

But eagerly as she had closed with the offer, a fit of nervousness came on with Sunday morning, and the new organist would certainly have made a hash of her first service but for the support of the faithful Edmund. His calmness and quiet allayed the restlessness of her own nerves, and it was something even to feel that he was close at hand to speak to in an emergency; so things went off better than they had at first promised. And there was such an animated recounting of experiences when they met at dinner, that Edmund protested it was a serious matter to sit between two organists, and that he must cry for mercy.

"What with your haut-boys and your diapasons, your tenors and your altos, there's no such thing as getting a word in edgeways," he cried. "If this is to be the order of things, I will have my trencher laid beside Kitty's in the kitchen, on future Sundays."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A HARD RIDDLE.

"There's somewhat in this world amiss
Shall be unriddled by-and-by."
TENNYSON (*Miller's Daught*

"There is a true Church wherever one hand meets another helpfull
RUSKIN (*Sesame and Lilies*).

BUT if the music-master was better known and appreciate
Harington than his more reserved family, his son and daug
were not forgotten at this time. And though Edmund did
know it till long afterwards, the Vicar was already in comm
cation with an architect of high standing, known slightl
himself; and the lad would find, when his present term
expired, there would be far less difficulty than he suppose
obtaining a good berth. This did not transpire till the
had neared its termination; but Althea had hardly made
début at Overton before she found a new field opening be
her in a most unexpected manner.

On coming home from a brief run in the spring suns
one afternoon, she was surprised to find old Miss Ho
awaiting her return—Miss Horton, whose awful brow
chilled the heart of that runaway bride so long ago.
nature was true and loyal beneath the austere surface, howe
and she had been puzzling her brain for weeks past to disc
in what possible way she could employ that wild, sin

daughter of her favourite pupil, now that trouble had come so darkly upon her.

She had always loved the first Althea, even if she had never quite forgiven the scandal she had brought upon an establishment of such long standing. She had never quite unbent to her afterwards; but she had taken the second Althea to educate at reduced charges, though she had always thought her a somewhat poor return for her pains.

The old lady still nominally presided over her school, though long independent of its pecuniary help. She tried as far as possible to stem the tide of modern ideas, difficult, nay, almost impossible, as was the task. Still it was something to hold the supervision of affairs, even if governesses and masters practically worked on their own lines. To be superseded had a tinge of sadness; but to resign was not her present intention. And now, half weary with the importunity of certificated teachers, she suddenly developed a new idea.

"Science and Literature, indeed," she had said indignantly, to herself, two minutes before closing the door on an exasperated subordinate. "There were no such new-fangled notions in my day. We did as well without Science; it only encourages questions most unsuitable for the feminine mind. No, I will *not* admit science classes. And, as to Literature——"

And then the thought of Althea and her poetry and old-world books dawned upon her mind, and demand and supply seemed to kiss each other on the instant.

"If they *will* have Literature, and not be content with History and Syntax and the Use of the Globes," she said to herself, "they shall have a teacher of my choosing. Certificated or not, it shall be all one to me. I will make it worth the girl's while, if she can give two hours a week to the younger pupils; and if she does not teach them much, they shall not suffer any loss. I can take care of that."

Althea was much fluttered on learning the errand on which her old governess had arrived; but her sparkling eyes and

rapidly changing colour made it impossible to doubt delight.

"It is just the work I should like of all others," she sa "if I only thought it possible to succeed. But so much expected nowadays that——"

"No 'buts,' if you really like the plan," replied the old la decidedly. "You shall have the octagon room all to yours so you see I trust you not to imbue them with doubtful go There will be no examination. I am sick of the name standards, and finals, and all such bombast; they make a think she has finished her education, when it is, in fact, o just beginning. I want the young people I have to deal w to go from me with heads receptive for further enlightenme not crammed for final examinations. If you can do this you can awaken an interest that will survive their school-d —you will amply satisfy me."

"And, Miss Horton, what do you think would be a g subject to begin upon?" was the next question. But Alt found she was to be left to her own resources, and that u this untried experiment her old governess would lend no ai

"I install you as my new teacher of Literature," she s "All the interference you will have from me is, that I s occasionally sound the young people in an informal man as to their studies with you, and their interest will be guarantee of your success."

"Teddy," remarked his sister that night, "behold Organist of St. Michael's Overton, and the Teacher of Lit ture at Miss Horton's Boarding School, Harington! Do recognize her? Because, I assure you, I do not."

"Things are looking up with the distressed gentlewon it seems," was the amused reply. "I met old Miss Hor and heard something from her own magisterial lips, and looked as though she had made a good move on the schola chess-board. But, dear me, Al, unskilled labour seems tc most to the fore just now."

"But it does frighten me!" cried the new teacher, forgetting her dignity as suddenly as she had assumed it. "This will be far more terrible than the organ—to run the gauntlet of a score or so of quizzical young girls, and feel to one's marrow, every time one does so, that they are engaged in poking fun. Ah! how past youthful follies return to haunt me now! I suppose it would never do for me to take you there, Teddy, as I did to Overton, to tide me over the first alarms? Ah! I *wish* you could come."

"My dear, it would be as much as my life was worth," was the solemn reply. "Unless, indeed, you could hang a spencer on these masculine limbs, and let me be another Florian among the girl-graduates. No; I'll speed the new professor on her way, but not intrude in the halls where poor father risked so much, in the days of his youth."

So, on the appointed day, Edmund rang the brilliantly polished bell-handle for his sister, and left her standing on the flight of stone steps alone, while he continued his way. She waved him a half-despairing adieu as the door opened, and then plunged into her new arena.

To encounter twenty pairs of eyes, of all shades and expressions, was a trying experience, especially for one who had lived so secluded a life, and had known so little of girlhood since her own school-days. Althea's glance ran rapidly round the table, with an instinctive effort to detect fitting soil for those seeds she had to sow, and with a suppressed sigh opened her book.

She had decided to begin on something modern and simple enough to interest all, and to break the ground with the legend of "Hiawatha," with sundry carefully prepared notes of her own, with which to draw out the youthful mind. Somehow, however, "Hiawatha" did not captivate that first afternoon; and Althea, accustomed to the eager sympathy of home, felt half paralyzed by the lack of interest. Her own voice began to sound unnatural, struggling through those carefully written

notes; and at last she crushed them in her hand, and gave the subject in despair. So they left "Hiawatha," and went to t village of *Grand Pré* instead; and, released from the strain unaccustomed notes, Althea became herself, and talked w the children over Evangeline and her early history, almost she would have done with her brothers at home. So the sp began to work, and interest to deepen, as the teacher's vi pictures grew one by one before their eyes. Her voice, t had its charm for their ears. By degrees it lost all constrai and lent itself to the long musical lines. She forgot that s was there to teach, and the sweet sad story, never looked i since her own life had so strangely altered, grew upon h with a new and all-compelling power.

The intervals of talk became gradually fewer, then altogetl ceased; and the reader, absorbed in a life-history that h gathered such new meaning for her own heart, followed t rhythm of the song in low thrilling tones, that, somehow, h the attention of the lightest.

"Something there was in her life, incomplete, imperfect, unfinished,
As if a morning in June, with all its music and sunshine,
Suddenly paused in the sky, and, fading, slowly descended
Into the east again, from whence it late had arisen."

There was a break in the voice here as Althea read, an quick deep breath, that sounded like a suppressed sob, br the stillness of the room. With almost overpowering clearn had come back the memory of that bright morning of her c life, when the diamonds had arrived, and when she had thou nothing was ever to be quite the same any more.

She struggled on yet a little longer with faltering voice; poor Althea's little barque seemed destined to run upon reefs whenever it was possible to do so, and a perilous mom was close at hand.

"Talk not of wasted affection; affection never was wasted:
If it enrich not the heart of another, its waters returning
Back to their springs, like the rain, shall fill them full of refreshmen

Patience: accomplish thy labour, accomplish thy work of affection;
Sorrow and silence are strong, and patient endurance is God-like;
Therefore accomplish thy labour of love, till the heart is made God-like,
Purified, strengthened, perfected, and rendered more worthy of heaven."

So far as this the trembling voice read on, brokenly; but then something drowned it in a silence that was more eloquent still. One memory after another came crowding in upon her —talks with Andrew in the Elm-leigh shrubbery; Mamsey's words of cheer, bidding her to hope and love; the Vicar's promise that she would find help by the way, in letters of gold. No wonder the words reached the yearning heart of the girl as if they had come straight from Heaven.

Even in sunny days she had, as she said, longed for goodness. Her nature had reached upwards, as a flower to the light. Now that she had set her feet on the track of the dawn, and was climbing patiently the steep ascent up which so many had striven before her, the words fell upon her heart like heavenly music from within the veil. It *was* an Eden glimpse, as Mr. Thorpe had said; and in spite of the twenty pairs of eyes, Althea's filled fast and overflowed.

But they were not critical, though curious. Girls in their teens are readily moved to sympathy; and even the seclusion of Miss Horton's walls had not been able to shut out rumours of passing events. They gathered round their new teacher in subdued and tender fashion, glances of quick understanding passing between them.

"I know what it is," said one thoughtful little maiden of thirteen, coming to kneel at Althea's side, and laying her head caressingly against her. "I have lost my mother, too."

But another, an elder one, looked mysterious, and, throwing her arm in girl-fashion round the new teacher, said affectionately—

"I would not finish it, Miss Holmes! It is too sad a story. We all see how it will end; and stories that do not end well are always sad, and should never be written."

"But this one *does* end well," cried Althea, looking t brightly through her sparkling tears. "Oh, if you do n mind, we *must* finish it together! I am not going to cry aga —indeed, these tears are not unhappy ones, even now. B listen—it will tell you better than I what I mean."

Althea kept her word, and did not cry any more, but re on to the last sentence without another break. The sequ was received with manifest disapproval, however; for just one of the teachers came to say the time had expired, qui a chorus of voices assailed her.

"You told us it had such a happy end!"

"And is it not a happy one?" was the reply.

She could not have said more than that in a strange presence, for Althea stood mightily in awe of certificat learning; but the flushed cheeks and wistful looks in t tender, limpid eyes conveyed their own message. Litt thirteen-year-old came up shyly to kiss the new teacher, a the other girls looked on with absorbed faces. The afterno had been a wonderful experience to them; and if Althea's ea did not tingle that night, they ought to have done. H history, in all its variations, was the subject of such animat discussion, and her person, voice, and manner were so free dilated upon, that it was well for her peace of mind she nev knew the interest she had inspired, or that the well-ground and qualified assistants were opening their eyes very wide the account.

They would have done so still more if they could ha followed her home—this poor child of many failures, so pro to ups and downs. She had nearly an hour for steady wo at her last "order" before tea-time, but, alas! not one stit was set that afternoon; and, standing at her open windo through which soft spring-like breezes reached her from t garden, she went off into a long day-dream, such as she rar indulged in now.

"Such a sorrowful ending," the girls had said. Ah, w

it was natural at their age; nay, even a year ago, would she not have felt much the same? Happiness is the natural yearning of every human heart, and to the young especially it is almost a necessity: it is only by degrees that one discerns a rarer happiness to be reached through dark places of pain.

Andrew's tears—strange and new experience—had fallen fast upon her hands that day of parting. Could it be possible they would leave a lasting impress, and that one day, even at the very last, the bliss of reunion might yet be theirs?

No voice answered but the sweet deep note of a blackbird below in the garden, that, at that unwonted pause in life's routine, sent a thrill to the girl's heart. It seemed like a message that only awaited interpretation.

"Purified, strengthened, perfected, and rendered more worthy of heaven." That was what befell Gabriel and Evangeline in their long training apart from each other; and surely, in that clinging kiss on the threshold of eternity, the memory of those painful years melted away as a dream of the night. Such an ending seemed to Althea at that moment one of rapture worth purchasing, even at such a price as she was paying now.

A low knock at the door roused her from her dream, and recalled her to a sense of passing time. "Coming, Kitty!" she cried, thinking it a call for tea, and throwing off her things with the old alacrity; but, to her surprise, Edmund's face appeared at the threshold, with something in it that made his sister's heart sink suddenly.

"Not more bad news, Edmund?" she asked, breathlessly. "Ah, do say it is not! I do not think we can bear any more."

"No, we need not call it bad, that I know of. It is a letter from Jack, and I thought—I thought perhaps you would like to read it by yourself. And, Al—dear old girl!—Kitty shall bring you a cup of tea up here to yourself, and then we'll have a good long ramble together this blessed spring evening. Shall we?"

"Perhaps. Give me the letter, Teddy. Now go and lea
me a little while, dear boy."

He kissed her and went away with a wistful look, heari
the key turned upon him as the door closed. And Alth
went back to the open window, and read a long boyish lett
such as had been wont to reach them regularly, vagu
wondering when the blow was coming that she knew was abo
to fall. It was nothing now to hear that Jack was getting w
into harness; that Aunt Grace's remittances were regul
though very far from lavish; that it was understood he ou
went to Elm-leigh by invitation now and then, for Miss Gra
had no intention of making him free of the house, like h
sister's favourite. All this, or much like it, had been t
substance of former letters—even to occasional meetings w
Mr. Valender; but she had come to nothing, so far, to accou
for Edmund's manner. Ah! here it was, at last; a few br
words in a postscript: "Break it gently to Al, for fear s
should still be thinking of the old days, but Andrew Valend
is engaged to Miss Conway. I know it is true, for Aunt Gra
told me so herself, last night."

Althea left the window, and the piping blackbird (after a
his song was not an *answer* at all—he was only a blackbi
whistling because his throat was filled for it), and, meantin
how *tired* she had become. Quite a sudden tiredness, as
that day beside the stile. To stretch one's weary frame upon
soft bed seemed all at once the best thing life had to off
She felt like a child that had over-wearied its brain by tryi
to guess a hard riddle, and that finds a certain relief in sayi
"I give it up."

"I give it up too," she murmured half aloud, nestling do
upon her pillows with a deep-drawn breath, as if to hide ev
from her mental vision a thought that was bitterest of a
"God send me sleep and deep forgetfulness, and to-morr
I will go back to my work once more. To-day I am too ti
even to think."

Even this small boon was not to be had in peace, however. Kitty accepted the excuse of the "splitting headache" as a wise woman should, and tormented her mistress with no remarks; but she could not do otherwise than take up the little three-cornered note that came after Edmund had sorrowfully gone out alone.

"Can you possibly go down to No. 9, Simpson's Close, for a little while this evening?" the Vicar's urgent message ran. "There has been a fatal accident on the railway, and the poor young widow is almost distracted with grief. Do not refuse me. I will return immediately after service."

There was a short struggle. Simpson's Close was not the refuge Althea would have chosen at such a time: besides, her own share of the riddle was too hard for her—she had just given it up in despair; how could she help a fellow-creature to solve hers?

Nevertheless, in that same dull, tired fashion, she rose, and put on the walking-dress so recently flung aside, and went out into the street, wondering whether Andrew and Daisy were even now straying together under the trees at Elm-leigh. And then, with a swift wave of pain, came the thought of Andrew's peculiarly gentle tone when he had arranged her secret flight upstairs, and his lingering "Good night—dear;" and Althea awoke from her reverie to find herself at her destination, without a word to say for herself.

Our mother Nature has a grand method of her own, however—strong in its very simplicity. Such a singular way, sometimes, of sweeping aside all minor distinctions, and showing us, in a strong, new light, the relations in which we stand to each other—brothers and sisters in the one great human family.

Althea was under this influence now. So she no longer wondered what she should say; but as the neighbours one by one dropped quietly away, she drew close to her poor heart-broken sister, and put her arm round her, letting her pour

out her lamentations as she would. Death almost alv canonizes; and that poor mutilated railway porter had alre become a saint in the eyes of her he had left behind. " was always good to me," she moaned. "He never beat but twice in his life, and that was when the drink was in hi Such was the record of a ten-months' married life.

He had probably never said "Good night" in Andr tender tone; but what then? He had been true after fashion, in spite of an occasional blow; and Althea looke the young creature rocking herself to and fro, and thought half to be envied, even now.

"There are sorrows worse than death," she whispered. a great lump rose in her throat, and choked further speech; the woman, roused from her own grief, suddenly remembe the robbery, and faltered broken words of comfort and che

They talked quietly together for a little time, and tho Althea did not attempt to speak of Carlyle's "Law of Whole," or Tennyson's "Gates of Eden," or Longfell "Crowned and sainted" ones; she felt that the school in wh they had learned was wide and catholic, and embraced hum dwellers in Castle Street, and even in Simpson's Close. T did each other good, those poor sorrowing women. It hard to say which helped the other most; and though th tears fell fast, they lost half their bitterness in that wondr power of mutual sympathy that only those can know who h ever experienced it.

Something in both the faces touched the Vicar when returned, according to promise, and made him think of th still unfilled vacancies with a passing sigh.

"Shall we say 'Our Father' together before we go?" asked softly. And perhaps in that small mean room, Simpson's Close, it dawned upon all three, in different wa that there are other ways of "giving up" a riddle than petulant despair.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE POINT AT ISSUE.

"Our character is but the stamp on our souls of the free choice of good or evil we have made through life."—GEIKIE.

LIFE had certainly not presented its brightest colours to Andrew Valender, the winter that followed that farewell on the river-bank at Harington. He had borne Miss Grace's oft-repeated thrusts in the old days, with provoking callousness, often with mirth; it affected him little to be thought "a ne'er-do-weel," by a stout and irascible old lady; but when the voice within took up the same tale, it was an altogether different affair.

A good-looking, easy-mannered, perfectly-dressed scapegrace is not a bad sort of a fellow in the world's estimation; it is your under-bred, bottle-nosed, down-at-heel type of the genus that is kept at arm's length: and young Mr. Valender, riding over to Elm-leigh so often, and spending long sunny afternoons on the grassy slopes with his newspaper or book, had used to find life pretty pleasant on the whole. All the more so that Indolence, stigmatized as the parent of many vices, seemed, in his case, to have gone childless; all the more so that steady industry—so distasteful to him—seemed likely to be unnecessary, as the old country seat, that had always proved a stronger attraction than town delights, would one day be his own.

But, behold! another sort of scapegrace had appeared upon

the scenes—not always easy-mannered, and very far from p
fectly dressed: one who got smirched by the elm-trees, a
was caught in all sorts of ludicrous circumstances, for wh
she had afterwards to pay heavy toll. For she was not on
Fortune's favourites, like himself, and her actions were weig
in quite a different balance to his own.

But the odd part of it was that that latter scapegrace—
brown-eyed, fun-loving, unconventional creature, whose col
was always changing, and whose laughter and tears were ne
far apart—had left a certain mysterious influence behind
that would prevent the *rôle* of the said "ne'er-do-weel" fi
ever being quite comfortable again. Laugh as he had d
hitherto at Miss Grace, unmoved as he had sat un
preachers' eloquence, Andrew had had a different idea
wasted time after that talk in the shrubbery, of the Ca
Street *ménage;* and though he and Althea had said fare
since then, life would never go back to what it had been bef
He hardly knew why he continued to plod at the office
such unwonted perseverance, except that an earnest, path
face seemed to come in between him and the temptation
throw up in disgust; and that that inner voice, haunting
with a constant sense of worthlessness, grew into a per
Nemesis, if he gave way to slothful ease.

Indulgence, say rather: never ease. Self-upbraiding,
reproach, self-scorn are not conducive to ease; and such w
Andrew's companions all that winter. A finer touch had b
laid upon an impressionable nature, that vibrated stran
after it had been withdrawn. So the touch that a lower
more selfish nature would have long since lost, and to wh
a stronger one would have responded bravely and courageou
was just too much for the present condition of the man,
the vibration grew into increasing self-loathing and pain.

The gaieties that were so much to his mother and sister
never had for him more than a passing attraction, least o
now, when he was heart-sick and sad; and his moth

well-furnished abode lacking the true essentials of home, it was natural that Elm-leigh should prove his greatest refuge. The country had ever delighted him; school-holidays had been spent for the most part, there: the old ladies understood his ways, and left him in peace nowadays; and, strange as it may seem, the stern Miss Wynton's face lighted at sight of him with a satisfaction his mother's had seldom betrayed.

Yes; the old home and the faithful old hearts did him more good than the opera and the green-room, or even the billiard-table, and since last summer it had become a spirit-haunted place.

Secrets it shared with him alone—him and no other: that ridiculous old wooden charger in the hall—those winding walks (where he smoked many a cigar that winter in solitude) appealed to him ever and always, till it seemed to him, sometimes, that *any* decision would be more endurable than this.

But there was another presence at Elm-leigh, almost as quiet and unobtrusive as Althea's shade. Daisy was rarely absent, except for brief intervals. "It was so sad for the old ladies," Mrs. Conway had said; "they must miss dear Louise so, so much, especially after late mournful events, that it was impossible to help sparing one's daughter for a few months." And Daisy, it would seem, liked retirement almost as much as Andrew himself, and cheerfully devoted her winter to rusticating at Elm-leigh, with little livelier society than Mr. and Mrs. Stanway and others of ripened years. But Miss Wynton's was not the only brow that cleared at the sound of a certain step, though there was a tacit understanding between the women that Andrew should be left to come and go as he would.

Feminine perceptions are usually quick, and no one at Elm-leigh could fail to see that Andrew's present mood would not brook interference: the rush of life hardly touched that quiet nest, however, so why precipitate matters? There was always time and to spare at Elm-leigh, for less important things than this.

It was not quite the life for a woman so young as Dais
schoolgirl would have found it intolerable; but Miss Cou
was no schoolgirl, and had a certain wisdom of her own.
had tasted life, and meant to taste it again presently; m
while, she cared enough for Andrew Valender to forego
than a gay winter on his account.

Yes, Daisy was always there. Those long evenings w
too dull to talk or even to read, Mr. Valender sat for an
at a time in pensive mood, or strolled up and down the
drawing-room in preoccupied silence, the only thing that m
them endurable to any of the party was Daisy's low, s
singing, that had supplanted cribbage nowadays.

It made Andrew less restless, even if he seemed hi
conscious of it. If it had been done for his amusement
would have resented it; but, as a mere accompaniment to o
things, it was a relief. Even Miss Grace was usually pat
for if by chance betrayed into irritability by the monoto
footsteps, Andrew always recollected suddenly that it was
time; or else laughed, and went to the dining-room f
smoke.

One spring evening, when Miss Felicia had retired wi
headache soon after dinner, and the younger sister had
on her clogs and gone off to see after her flower-beds, D
went quietly to the piano as usual, as though its compar
ship were the only resource left her. Conscious all the w
too, of a figure pacing the broad walk alone—of its cor
nearer, and entering the low sash—and still the soft croo
voice continued its song to the end; then something in
deep dejection of the figure in the window made the girl
hesitatingly, and then womanly love and pity overc
maidenly reserve.

"What is it, Andrew?" she asked gently; and the
more than the question appealed to him just then.

He was resting his folded arms on the back of his cl
gazing out into the deepening twilight when his view

intercepted by a not unwelcome vision; it was not quite the Daisy of old who was standing so quietly before him, and the touch and tone seemed at the moment like water to parched and thirsty lips.

"I am so *miserable*," he said, with an emphasis most unlike himself; and, taking her cool, soft hands, he laid his throbbing forehead down upon them just an instant, with a sudden sense of relief.

"I know you are," was the low reply, "and it makes me miserable too, to look on at sorrow I cannot help."

He raised his head, but still held the two soft hands—how soft and dimpling they were, yet firm too—without that peculiar little flutter that had always amused him in the touch of those other hands!

"You always were my little champion," he said, tenderly. "But do not be miserable, Daisy; I have enough to answer for already, without clouding your sunshine with my selfish gloom."

"But, Andrew—why? Life was not meant to be passed in gloom. You are too hard upon yourself. Oh, if I could only help you!" And the rest was lost in sudden-springing tears.

Her companion was deeply touched, though startled at the same time. He released the hands, but only to fold a half protecting arm around the trembling girl. Was it possible that old gossip about their joint names had any foundation, for at least one of them?

"You are too good to me, Daisy," he said, almost as he would have spoken to a loving little sister, if he had had such a blessing. "I do not deserve that any one should fret about me. Be happy, child, and enjoy your life while you can. I am not worth your tears."

"But cannot I help you in *any* way?" she asked.

"Perhaps you do help me, already," he responded. He was in just that mood that a loving hand might turn him whither it would; and if Daisy had bidden him go straight away, and set right a wrong he had done, it is probable the

morning might have seen his face set towards Harrin
Some few women might have done so; but Daisy was not
of them.

"These tears are sweet," he went on, "but I will not
them shed for me. Keep them for one more worthy."

The dusk was growing into dark, and if he had not
been so near, he would not have heard the faint whisper
seemed to come in spite of herself—

"It makes no difference—I cannot help it."

That was how it came about. A moment later, Miss G
coming in from the garden, caught sight of a figure envelo
in the hall for departure, and that hardly waited to retu
civil answer to her surprised exclamation. "Yes, Miss G
Too little exercise lately; shall take the train halfway.
bye!"

Mr. Valender had the first sound sleep that night tha
had enjoyed for long. It was an unexpected turn of a
certainly, but it was a decision—that was something, a
set at rest that old haunting misery about retracing the
false step. Pledged to a woman who loved him, his c
was at least clear now; and if it made her happy—well,
should suffice: he did not expect happiness for hi
What did it matter about happiness? He did not deser
if it lay at his feet for the asking. And the thought of D
gladness comforted him for a little while; it seemed to re
his life from that sense of utter selfishness from which h
so recoiled. If the sweet rose was to be his no lon
the rose whose very prickles had enhanced its charm—
a small pink-tipped daisy was not to be despised.

Then, the satisfaction of everybody! It was good t
dear old Cousin Felicitas, and her returning happin
that was almost the best part of it all. For when it ca
his mother's pleasure, and Mildred's amused glances, and
Uncle Val's sudden favour, Andrew felt unaccountably ru
he felt like a bird that has sweetly and unresistingly w

into the toils, and is henceforth to be petted and fed like any barn-door fowl.

Even Daisy cloyed before long. She had told him truly that she wished to make him happy; but, gentle as she was, and unexacting too for a long while, she somehow missed the mark. Last year a girl's voice had been breathing "Excelsior!" and though he had laughed at the time, the word had sunk deeper far than she knew: it was an echo of this that made the level plain so aimless and profitless now. He missed the earnestness that had refreshed while it braced and animated him, and Daisy's comfortable creed could only soothe, and then half disgust him.

"I feel like a good boy who has had his face stroked by a smug hypocrite till he bids fair to become as bad himself," he broke out one day, when alone with his *fiancée* at Mrs. Valender's. "If Mildred looks at us like that much longer from under her lashes, I shall blurt out something to repent of! Do give her a hint, Daisy. 'Sugar-plums for good children that do as they are bid.' That is what she says, as plainly as if it were put in words."

"Perhaps she is jealous," remarked Miss Conway, contentedly. For, truth to tell, she was too occupied at that moment with some little personal adornment she was preparing for the evening's entertainment, to take in the meaning of her companion's irritation. "But what are the sugar-plums, Andrew?"

Half attention is not to any man's taste, however, and this particular man was not in the most amiable mood. He waited till Daisy raised her eyes from her work, and then replied indifferently—

"Nay, ask Miss Felicia about those. They are in *her* safe keeping."

Daisy's face flushed all over with a manifest change of manner.

"I think that is not quite nice, Andrew," she said, quietly. "Such things are better left without expression."

He laughed, begged her pardon the next minute, and not long to wait for it; for Daisy, pushing her work all a moved to his side with a cheerfulness that was mean awaken his.

"After all, is it not nice to be good children," she as brightly, "and to have all our people make much of What more can we want?"

Andrew did not answer that question. He diverted D attention to the gauze ruffles instead, and gave her the benefit of his advice on the subject.

"We can meet on the dressmaking ground," he refl bitterly, "if a higher standpoint is beyond us. I dare sa shall grow sleek and comfortable after a time."

For only that morning he had met Jack Holmes, and h for the first time of the new Organist and Teacher of Litera and the knowledge left him in a mood between bitterness despair. He did not know the cause of these new effo Althea's, or it would have tormented him still more; bu think of her toiling to earn her own bread, stung him al past endurance, and this helped to make the thought of expected sugar-plums as distinctly degrading as if they been a bribe.

He did not go to the concert that night, as he had eng to do, and Daisy went at last with other escort, and wi failing faith in her own power. One thing after another showing her this: her patience sometimes met with rebu her cheerfulness with something approaching scorn; they n looked at things from the same standpoint—they prob never would. So at length she took the initiative. It w dainty little note—sad, even in its self-possession; and th he rejoiced in his release, Andrew sighed. His fervent was that his little champion might soon meet with one deserving of her, come to himself what might.

But if he had grown tired of the sunshine of his rela smiles, he might console himself that an ominous change

impending. The barometer went down more suddenly than it had gone up; and one day, in the Elm-leigh drawing-room, the storm burst—if indeed the measured tones of one cold, incisive voice can be likened to a storm. Miss Grace had passed him on the threshold with a contemptuous snort; she was evidently withdrawing to leave her sister the field, and Miss Wynton was not long in coming to the point at issue.

"So *this* is the result of nearly thirty years of indulgent kindness!" she exclaimed, in a voice that, indignant as it was, was yet held in with perfect self-control. "Grace was right all along; you have been fooling me to the top of my bent!"

"I was not aware of that," was the young man's reply, with an attempt at carelessness. "If you mean I have disappointed you in the late turn of events, I am sincerely sorry, which is all any man can say. I failed to satisfy Daisy; she sent in her resignation: and there the matter ended."

It was an unfortunate choice of language; Andrew himself felt how callous the explanation sounded: but it was no easy matter to him to lay bare his feelings at any time, least of all to a ruffled and indignant auditor.

"I have indeed been mournfully deceived," was the low rejoinder, after a slight astonished pause; and the deep dejection in the tone roused all her favourite's better feelings. Pride was struggling with affection and misunderstanding, but the old lady saw nothing of this, under the assumed lightness, and went on. "The man who can speak of a broken engagement as coolly as he would of the dismissal of a clerk or a governess, is showing himself in his true colours. There is, at least, *that* to be said. And the man who can lightly win the affection of one woman after another, to cast it aside as lightly when it suits him to do so, scarcely satisfies my ideas of honour. May I be so bold as to ask if there is a third attachment to account for this?"

Andrew winced perceptibly, and all thought of opening his heart was at an end for that occasion.

"I have told you already that I am sorry," he said, grav
"if there were anything else to say it should be said."

"There is at least one thing else," was the quick rejoin
"for, unfortunately, sorrow does not undo the past. We
speak openly this once, at all events. Tell me, Andrew,
any idea of Althea Holmes that has caused you to take
last step? Because, if you mean, some day, to return to
it would be fairer to let me know."

He understood her now, and what lay behind that
magisterial air. He felt more distinctly than ever that
sugar-plums were being openly tendered; that on his an
depended something that would make an immense differ
to his future; that it rested with him to decide between
and honest independence.

It was an uncomfortable moment—the having to de
Especially when he had no distinct resolve about Althe
all; when he was as far as ever from knowing what to
when a little judicious temporizing might satisfy Miss Wy
and yet leave him with his boats still unburned.

But what was it that rose all at once before his mind's
as if it had been, indeed, his guardian angel? That su
vision of a girl under the shrubbery elms, who, when he
expressed a wish to be a free man, and enjoy Elm-leigh
without a suspicion of ulterior views, had flashed upon
radiant glance and joyous approval.

Was it possible that her pure prayers had anything t
with his decision now, as he lifted his head, and me
questioner's look with steady determination?

"You appeal to fairness and candour, Miss Felicia
said, "and I will answer you as frankly as I can. My
dition is too complicated to be very clear, even to m
as to any marriage ideas, they are at present far from
thoughts, for only too good reasons. You spoke of A
Holmes; well, I don't think she is quite the woman to b
for the asking. She loved me once, but my late achieve

have doubtless altered affairs altogether. Her affection is not of the kind to be thrown aside like a glove, and worn again at will."

He checked himself suddenly in his unconscious fervour, for there was more contempt than sympathy in his companion's face; and, with a change of manner, he went on carelessly—

"So, you see, my position being so uncertain, I am not likely to run the risk of a refusal. Low as I have fallen in my own esteem, I don't feel equal to running the risk of any woman's 'nay'—it would be *too* humiliating. Besides, low, degraded, cowardly as I feel myself to be, I am not strong enough, even now, to take my wife in the face of the world, and let it do its worst."

The old lady's face softened involuntarily, and she breathed more easily.

"Then, in that case, Andrew——" she began.

"In that case," he interrupted, as if to prevent any compromise, "you see, things do not augur well for any marriage at all. But of this one thing you may be distinctly certain—if I ever ask any woman to be my wife, it will be Althea Holmes, and none other. You asked for a definite answer, so, as far as possible, I have given it."

"Thank you, Andrew."

Miss Wynton had never spoken to her favourite in just that tone before, and he could not fathom half the emotion that was struggling in her strong reserved nature. Something of the same sense of dreary disappointment had filled her on hearing of her favourite young sister's foolish marriage, but even that was nothing to her present grief. Andrew was the link with that old solitary love-story of her youth; she had loved him from his childhood with the blind unreasoning devotion of a usually cold nature: it was terrible to give him up, but, if necessary, she could be as determined as himself.

"There is one other thing to be said," she remarked quietly, after that short involuntary pause; "for candour deserves an

equal candour. Though we have never referred to the sul
before, you know, of course, that you have an interest in l
leigh and in my personal property."

"I have heard rumours, of course," replied Mr. Valer
a flush suddenly overspreading his face; "but it is not an
matter to talk about together. Need we discuss it? I w
much rather leave you and Mr. Venables to arrange everyt
between you."

"Never fear but we shall arrange," was the dry rejoin
"And I will not detain you long upon a subject that,
agreeable as it is, had better be faced at once. I pres
you know that, if I were to die to-day, this house, together
all my personal estate except a few legacies and bequ
would pass into your own possession? Did you unders
this?"

"Vaguely—to some extent," he murmured, with a de
cating gesture; for the reading of a will, as it were, in
presence of the testator, was peculiarly painful and humiliat

"Then all that I want you clearly to understand no
this: Since you are resolved to act in direct opposition to
wishes, it changes the whole face of affairs. Much as I lo
my sister, her marriage irrevocably separated us, as after ev
have too terribly proved. Her daughter was very far fi
satisfying me, in many points: there were peculiarities al
her I could never understand; her engagement to you
one of the most mysterious things I ever met with, and it
an equal blow to your own relatives and friends. Theref
convinced as I am that such a choice would be most
advised, you know my resolution; for I would leave all I h
to charities rather than help it forward. Elm-leigh shall
sold rather than contaminated. Fancy the family of a *con*
being free of these old rooms! It would make me turn e
in my grave."

"It is a painful thought," assented Andrew, with a sli
shudder. And his face, which had been growing pale un

Miss Wynton's remarks, took an ashy tint at the last words; for the term she had employed in all its naked deformity had a peculiar horror for one of his mould.

The old lady detected it plainly, and added, as firmly as before—

"So you cannot say you do not know my mind, and what your refusal will entail. Only promise me to think no more of that escapade of last summer, and all things will go on as before."

He moved behind her suddenly, and hung over her chair a moment with a return of his old fondness, perhaps to hide the strange tears that had risen at her last remark. For he knew perfectly things could never go on as before; that since meeting Althea, his character must take an upward or downward bent, as he himself should choose.

"Good-bye, Cousin Felicitas," he said affectionately, with his hands on her shoulders, and the frank face so near her own.

"Then you promise me, Andrew? That is well."

But he lifted his head quickly, though both face and voice were equally gentle still.

"No; I make no promises. If I am too cowardly to do right, I will at least leave myself free. I can never be bound by another's will."

"Then you do right to say good-bye," was the answer, after a half-unconscious pause. "You will find I can be determined as well as you. Shake hands with me, Andrew Valender, for this will be a longer farewell than I ever dreamed of."

"But you will not shut your doors against me?" he asked. "You will let me come and see you, as I have done all my life?"

But the old lady waved him off without further words. She looked worn and aged since the recent turn of events; and, as her favourite showed himself capable of running completely counter to her wishes, a forlorn scepticism as to any disinterested motive on his part had taken possession of her.

So that when Mr. Valender appeared, a day or two a wards, and took his old place as if nothing had happe Miss Felicia's face expressed neither surprise nor pleasu only inscrutable reserve. But Miss Grace, who seldom any use in disguises, came to the point with her usual di ness when he bid her good night in the garden, and surv him with a keen, inquiring glance, from under her brimmed hat.

"Did Felicia tell you Mr. Venables has been here morning, Andrew?" she asked, pointedly.

"No. Good night, Miss Grace. I've overshot my t I'm afraid. I must run for it."

"You've overshot something else, too," was the repl Miss Grace still detained his hand. There was a queer of dawning respect in the broad face, however, and a quizzical good nature under the bantering tone.

"Pardon my denseness," he began, in his light fashion, as I shall certainly lose my train——"

"Go along, then, boy," was the answer, as his hand suddenly released. "Only you ought to know, if you do that it is all over with you, and that a few charities will be by your decision the other day. So now, if you don't cheese to your bread, you will have no one but yourse blame, for Felicia's was no idle threat."

He hardly waited for the concluding words, but wav bright good night, and sped away. The next moment Grace saw his light figure on its rapid way through the gat

"I wonder if he will care to come again," she said to he turning back to her flower-beds with a sigh; for it seemed then, as if Elm-leigh, without the presence of the "ne'e weel," would be a melancholy place at the best; whi strange, new compunction arose within her at the thoug many a hard speech of hers in the past.

While Mr. Valender, catching his train just in the nic time, and taking his seat with quickened breathing, wond

vaguely if it were the mere excitement of the run that had brought that sudden lightness and sense of freedom, and whether he would wake up to-morrow in the "blues," and call himself an idiot for throwing up Elm-leigh for a whim.

Strange to say, he did not. He left other people to do that for him when it should reach their ears; and wisely reflected that to be called a "lucky dog" is sometimes quite as offensive as the epithet of an idiot or a fool.

He had to work now to some purpose, but work—"the condition of health, the law of progress"—does more for a man than bring grist to the mill; it often clears mental cob-webs, and renders our threefold nature receptive of better things. It was uphill work, of course, as all must find who gird the armour upon limbs grown soft and supple by luxury. If there had not been stern necessity for exertion, it is too possible that even now Mr. Valender might have yielded in disgust; but, as it was, he slowly gained ground. Yet, as the achieved results were less material than moral, it took him a long while to discover any at all; he did not see till long, long afterwards, that in these slow, monotonous years he had found those "stepping-stones" from a dead past to "higher things," for which Althea had longed.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN AUTUMN DAY.

"What the past has sown,
Is in its harvest garner'd, reap'd, and grown."

DICKENS.

"Beautiful in her holy peace, as one
Who stands at evening, when the work is done,
Glorified in the setting of the sun!"

WHITTIER.

Do you remember the time I asked you first to come with
to little Harington? That bright day when the horse-chest
were in flower, and the hills were darkly blue, and the Sp
message was in the air, with its mingled joy and pensiver
like the heart of youth itself? It is not springtime
however: there is a restful quiet upon everything that tell
harvests gathered, and achieved results, and labours do
life's backward glance of peaceful memory, instead of fitful
uncertain hope. The slopes of those distant hills lie rest
after the reapers' and gleaners' tasks; the little river is
warm blaze of sunlight, upon which a lazy boat or two
becalmed; for it is vacation time, and young Hopeful is rest
too, after *his* harvest, be the crop plentiful or the reverse,
such a day as this is not meant for unnecessary exert
Many harvests have been gathered in since that spring
of ours, for it is five years ago now; and leisurely as
Time touches these country spots, the sowing and reaping

inevitably on in more senses than one, for five years is a long enough space to have results to show for good or ill.

The little house in Castle Street has lost another of its inmates, for Edmund has long since obtained an appointment in a distant county; Althea, her father, and the faithful handmaid are all that are left of the old life. For the secret hope the "professor" had entertained of welcoming an infant pupil from over the seas, to renew Louise's own childhood in his home, had not yet been realized, and Louise has had her sorrows in this five years' interval. The little life that was to have cheered Uncle Roy, and to have proved a beacon in his dark hours of loneliness and bereavement, lingered a few brief hours only in this troublous world, and the mother heart had been made to ache since then over the loss of another short-lived joy.

Now the time was drawing near when husband and wife were to return for their first visit to England; and Grandmamma Conway was much occupied nowadays with soft, fleecy knittings and exquisite socks and vests, for an infant Anglo-Indian, as his mother playfully named him, to whom English winds might prove disastrous. It is astonishing, by the way, what employers of labour these young Anglo-Indians—or Anglo-Saxons either—contrive to be, even in their earliest years, and how elegant and leisure-cloyed grandmothers awake to new energies with the new demand upon their faculties. Talk of dock labourers on strike! Their delighted return to toil after long-delayed claims have been satisfied, is as nothing to the enthusiasm with which such young philanthropists inspire their followers.

Even dreamy, quiet Elm-leigh felt a foreshadowing of his sway. Aunt Felicia did not rival Mrs. Conway, indeed, in the knitting department; for Phelps had stood so long between her and life's requirements, that the old lady hardly recognized knitting-needles even as aids to leisure, and missionary baskets had never formed part of the easy-going Stanway *régime*. But

a certain lingering by the old rocking-horse in the hall betra
in what direction Miss Wynton's thoughts were travelling,
she would remark casually to Phelps, "This will be nice
the little boy." And if old Rawlings paused in brushing
the leaves on the lawn to comment on the playground it w
make for the young gentleman by-and-by, he noticed how
mistress's sad, handsome old face lighted up with pleas
For handsome as it was still, it was unmistakably softened,
oftentimes very sad. She had had her way—Elm-leigh wa
her own safe keeping; her favourite had come and gone
these years, but no word had ever passed between them s
on the question of inheritance, nor, indeed, on that other q
tion that had proved such a stumbling-block between th
Andrew was to all intents and purposes satisfactory. He
gained his uncle Valender's approval ere now, by his steadi
and punctuality. There was a rumour of partnership betw
uncle and nephew. He was as affectionate towards herse
he had been before their passage-of-arms, and his pleasur
his visits was most certainly sincere; while since that ever
day he had never mentioned the name of Althea Holmes.

Truly she ought to be satisfied. She had relinquished
old wish of hers about Daisy—the only match-making plot
had ever conceived; for, like many such plots, it had fa
through. Miss Conway, though certainly heart-touched,
far from heart-*broken*, and red eyes and such weaknesses
ever been against her principles; so Mildred and she had
up their old intimacy, in spite of the brother's deficien
And when her friend was no longer Mildred Valender,
intimacy had deepened; and now, in Mildred's circle, D
had lately met one who was to change the current of her li

In a very humdrum, matter-of-fact way, certainly; but,
me! whose fault was that? She was not a schoolgirl r
the pink-tipped Daisy had lost her best and freshest affec
in the old Surrey home; even the name did not suit he
well now as then. Music and moonlight had been plea

enough in those fond old days, she thought, as she turned over her photographs one morning, and her glance lingered on a face that had once been dear. "But if we have not what we like, we must like what we have."

Miss Conway had always had a little bit of the philosopher about her, and so she cheerfully turned the page, and prepared to do the very best under new conditions.

There is compensation everywhere. Andrew Valender had let down his sounding-line into this little lakelet of woman-nature, and it had touched bottom with a suddenness that surprised him, fairly as he thought he had gauged it; but, then, a sunny pool seems all the shallower after mid-ocean. He had just been testing another nature, and his soundings had confused him, and he had given up in despair. Let no one dream that life is *easier* in the deeper water!

Miss Wynton, however, was not satisfied even yet. There was a look on her favourite's face sometimes that had never used to be there, and for which she caught herself watching instinctively, when he was long silent. It was not the restlessness and irritation of past days; they had left him long since: but it seemed as if, in the country home, old questions revived, and confronted him with a sense of duty unfulfilled, of joy wasted, and of life being lived on a lower than its rightful level. Only a vague part of all this did Miss Felicia guess, watch as she would; and not even this part, until a sudden change had come in her own life, and she found herself the last of the old Wynton stock—living out her days in self-centred and, therefore, unhappy isolation.

It was a great shock, Miss Grace's death. Not only that it had come so suddenly, but that the idea of being the sole survivor had never entered Miss Wynton's head. And now, as she paced the garden alleys, and missed the familiar tap of the silver-mounted cane, her lonely musings would travel back over the long years to the time before the first break in the home circle. The most fearful punishment for

self-seeking, surely, is that we shall inevitably find what
seek. Miss Felicia was finding it now, and proving
there are worse things in life than the thwarting of our
desires.

Miss Grace had begged for Althea on the first day of
illness; and the girl had responded at once, though nei
imagined how short the invalid's time was destined to
She had no fear in coming; she knew that Andrew Vale
was far away at that time, on a holiday excursion with
sister and her husband, so she returned to the scene of
life's brief romance with different feelings to those with wh
she had left it.

She had done with dreams, she thought. Head and ha
were always full nowadays. She could not even leave ho
for this week with her relative, without much planning
consultation; for Althea was no dreamer now, and her l
definite purpose was as yet only partly fulfilled.

Yet, industrious as she promised herself to be, there
a spell about Elm-leigh that somehow held her fast whene
alone, and the shrubbery was still haunted ground. She co
not breathe the air in the garden, but old voices spoke to
from the well-remembered flowers, deeper, more imperi
than those upon the page before her; and she found tha
"Wallenstein" was to be ready for her pupils, it must be
pared indoors.

The whole week was spent at Miss Grace's side.
poor invalid, even when too weak for conversation, seemed
find comfort in merely seeing the girl's bending figure o
her book or needlework. But many a long talk they h
between whiles, of the little home in Castle Street.

And when, after Althea's departure, Miss Grace rou
herself, after long meditation, it was to say to her sister, w
a return of her old decision—

"I shall leave my little savings to the organ-grinder.
man's a good man; and, if I could have my time over ag

I would be better friends with him than we've ever been. But he shall have some peace and comfort in his old age, if I can manage it. As to leaving young people money, it's against my principles. Young Jackanapes would only make ducks and drakes with it, though he is steady enough now; while as to his sister, she would give it all away as soon as look at it. Yes, I've quite made up my mind to leave what I have to poor Althea's husband, as she is beyond the reach of my help herself."

Poor Miss Grace! She always spoke of her unknown brother-in-law as if he turned a barrel-organ in the streets. Indeed, her conceptions of him were so hazy, that she most likely thought of him in somewhat that fashion. But, at least, her intentions were good. She only lived a short time after this; and then her sister's melancholy reign began, in which doubts of herself—strange and new to that decided nature—first took root. Family pride was beginning to yield at last, like a starved-out garrison, that no mere force can compel to surrender. Haunting thoughts of lives she had helped to spoil, returned day by day, till the silence of the great empty rooms took up the strain, and Miss Grace's words seemed to re-echo fifty times a day: "If I could have my time over again!"

Miss Felicia began to think that, if *she* could have her time again, the first Althea should not have died a stranger in the home of her youth; that childish voices—those of her sister's children—should have laughed and shouted from the garden and corridors, at least once or twice in a year: but the day for that, alas! was gone by for ever. And the second Althea? The old lady could never answer that question, and pride forbade her asking Andrew, much as she wished to do. Sometimes she felt, in the long wakeful hours of the night, that if only things could go back to what they had been before her cruel, stinging words to Althea, the dregs of life would be, at least, less bitter than they now were. She had just one hope, one consolation. Louise was coming soon—and her little child.

Louise would help her if no one else could: if she could
hold up till the child of her heart returned, she had a so
unreasoning faith that those terrible voices would cease u
the influence of Louise's smile.

But if the little Anglo-Indian might look to his pate
grandmother for vests of the most finished material, an
his maternal aunt for a welcome to a stately home, it is prob
that his infant lips would taste the real wine of life in
small dwelling in Castle Street. "Pacha" was alread
great personage there. With the true Castle Street inst
he had been furnished with a nick-name as soon as h
and ever since the "professor" had laid down the Cal
letter with a bright smile, announcing that a young P
had arrived, the epithet had been adopted as if it had
duly registered, and would probably cling to him as lon
he lived.

It amused Althea greatly to see the secret and shamef
preparations for the young potentate on the part of her f
and Kitty, in their respective ways. Whenever he sh
come among them, the homage would be open and undisgu
at present, if Althea came upon Kitty practising absurd fi
in pastry or dough (with currants for eyes), she detect
desire on Kitty's part to conceal the nature of her handiw
and a business-like return to sensible crust.

The "professor" was even more sensitive to discovery;
it almost brought the tears into his daughter's eyes to see
secretly poring by the hour over cherry-stones he was ca
into grotesque faces, though his sight required help nowa
for such nice application. There was quite a fleet of colc
paper boats, and a rude man-of-war or two, collecting
certain wide rubbish drawer, now generally locked with
Althea went hastily to it for string, one day that it had
left open, and paused spell-bound at the sight before
while her eyes grew dreamy and tender with a host of
recollections.

The "professor" came unexpectedly upon her as she stood thus, and a mixture of irritation and shame caused him to break out in his old style—

"That's right! Trust Paul Pry and the womenkind to find out one's belongings, be they behind seventimes-bolted doors! As for you, you vixen, all I wish for you is that you may marry a Bluebeard one of these days, and find the heads of your five predecessors in a secret drawer."

This time, however, Althea received the wish as meekly as if it had been a benediction, and only laid down the carved cherry-stone with a loving smile.

"I call them 'the outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace,' dear daddy," she remarked softly, as she turned away.

Althea herself had as yet no plans on Pacha's behalf, far less had she made preparations; yet though she carved no faces, and moulded no dough rabbits, she was sensible of a great longing for the child at that particular time. She had kept steadily on with her Needlework Association all these five years, and with the organ at Overton; but it was in the class-room at Miss Horton's that her chief interest centred, and the sympathetic love she had inspired there beyond her utmost expectation. Her fancied defeat that first day had proved in reality a victory, inasmuch as it had placed her in touch with her pupils, and won their affectionate regard in a way she had little intended. The quick girl-instincts had read swiftly and surely between the lines; and on that first day, at all events, they read from living history. But it had been a shock to the young teacher herself, and she henceforth avoided "Evangeline" as she would a snare, and, gathering up all her forces, had rallied round her her little band, plunging with them into the remote regions of early classic lore, where, for a year or two, they broke up together, bit by bit, the "Tale of Troy," and the literature of the world's youth.

She painted for them clear mental pictures from her own

vivid imagination; with Edmund's help—so long as he w
home—she drew upon every available source of inform
with an ardour that was soon reflected in her auditors;
Althea could never do things by halves, and the mental t
had proved a medicine for the mind diseased. She lovec
work for its own sake, and seemed to have found her fi
sphere; for whatever course of literature they took up fo
year, the class never failed to be interested—the true te
success: while lonely days seemed things of the past.

But through all the interest, through all the growing fri
ship of these eager girls, Althea never forgot the goal tow
which she was aiming; and the secret fund between br
and sister was an absorbing topic as the time of Art
imprisonment gradually expired.

Edmund had made all arrangements; had secured
the eventful week of the release, the modest lodging fo
sister and himself, to which he would conduct Arthur f
home welcome, as he emerged from the scene of his pu
ment. The money for passage, outfit, and present n
tenance was all in hand, and the simple arrangements
made, before the father was apprised of the scheme; t
after the first rapturous discovery of his children's devo
the tender-hearted organist blessed Aunt Grace's memo
another's behalf even more than he had done in his
inasmuch as he himself would now have somethin
give.

That had been a week of rare, almost unearthly blessed
that had welcomed their long-lost one to the little lod
that symbolized for him a home. They would prob
never talk much of it in future: it was a week shut in
the world's eyes as a sacred shrine, hallowed by forgi
love, by heartfelt repentance, by the rapture of self-forge
devotion—so that in all after-life it would leave a memo
of the very gates of heaven.

Dream-like it all was. The meeting of the brothers at

prison gates; Althea's yearning face at the window of their temporary home, and the close embrace upon the threshold; the father's smothered sobs as he clung to his heart-broken son (for Roy would not be left behind when it came to the point) —all these things were stamped upon the heart of each, past the possibility of outward expression. The life in that secluded lodging, with its cheap, gimcrack furniture and flaunting carpet had a halo over it for once—a life "true to the kindred points of Heaven and Home."

It was not all at high pressure, even then. The one subject was avoided as if it had never been; and the old quips and cranks came up once more, with the revival of old memories and household tales.

With an effort, at first, from a desire to remove a natural restraint and pain; afterwards, they often came up as a cloak to hide emotion, in the near prospect of a long and uncertain parting. But under the liveliest sally and the most sportive allusion of his beloved ones, the newly recovered son and brother was reading lessons deeper than the most powerful preaching would probably have awakened. And it was not only when the "professor" led the simple family worship morning and evening that the mother's presence seemed among them; it was with them every hour of the day—under the most prosaic business arrangement, or the lightest word—with a constant sense of nearness and blessing.

Jack rushed in like a whirlwind on one of these same days, all the more boisterous to hide his feelings; so that he too shared the peculiar happiness of that week for a brief time, before leaving for town. His father and he left together, but Edmund and Althea lingered to the last with the one to whom they had devoted themselves, accompanying him on board the steamer; and it was only when the order was given to leave the vessel that Edmund drew his sister away.

There were no tears upon their faces, nor upon the one they had left behind; it was one of those rare moments when

Heaven-inspired hope a
as he watched that rece
gaze, that the land for wh
world, not merely a new l
day, into another existenc
one of old; that though l
of his birth, yet two good
from him, and had given
sanctified with God's resto

As for Althea, she nev
request to her to sit still,
sun-flecked water towards t
still upon the one figure the
upright in the boat, with th
radiance still upon her face
could ever have called Alth
ceased remonstrating, as I
supporting arm round her ti
figure they sought; and t
ness of a purpose fulfilled,
shore.

A strange unutterable -

Poor Althea! it was one of her old experiences. A spirit flight, and then a rebound; glimpses of rapture, and then closed gates. Would it be always so? Would her visions of beauty always fade into commonness, and life ever press down upon them its most sordid side?

Edmund felt her clasp tighten upon his arm as they picked their way through the dingy streets, amid the deafening cries of costermongers and the unsavoury odours of water-side humanity; he saw she looked suddenly tired, but he did not realize the wave of depression that was passing over her. People that mount highest often have their corresponding falls, and poor Althea recognized the rapid decline of emotion, and sighed. The magic had passed from the little lodging all at once, and she only saw now how hideous were its tints, and felt how impossible it was to breathe within its close walls; so in a limp disconsolate fashion, she left Edmund to manage everything, and then took herself to task, in the night watches, for coldness and ingratitude after such rich blessings.

To-morrow, when she got back to Harington and fell into the old ways again, everything would come right—so she told herself; yet, for a time, it did not. She took up her old duties again; yet the spring of energy was lacking: it seemed so much harder to set to work on her own account than it had been to help another; and just now, while nature lay resting in full autumnal suushine, Althea felt more disposed to rest too. Her own precious harvest had been gathered in; and dull and tired though she was, her heart had its continual harvest song of thanksgiving, and by-and-by, she doubted not, she would begin again.

Meanwhile, as her father filled his secret drawer with treasures for the coming darling, Aunt Althea had got into her old habit of dreaming; and now, as she sat in the window-seat of the "Dutch Interior," planning in her mind's eye where the cot should be placed for "Pacha," she was conscious of a distinct sense of relief in the prospect of his arrival. He

be, in this interval, by the
A tap on the door rous
Kitty, rather cross at a r
her mistress, handed in
departed, aggrieved at hav
of a busy half-hour, only to
of in vacant abstraction.

It was from Miss Felicia
received from her since h
settled. What could she ha
Only that "she would be g
week or two, if she could be
pretty now; Althea had use
care to come?"

And, wondering, Althea c
quick; she detected someth
those quiet sentences, and
from such an appeal, howeve
day, she was on her way to E

"Andrew, what *can* you mean?"—*p.* 373.

CHAPTER XXIX.

DUSK AND DAYLIGHT.

"When we have proved, each on his course alone,
The wider world, and learnt what's now unknown—
Have made life clear, and worked out each a way,
We'll meet again,—we shall have much to say."

A. H. CLOUGH.

ALTHEA'S ears had not deceived her—it was not a casual invitation, but the appeal of a longing heart, in which the better nature was struggling to expression with an earnestness never felt before.

For long months of loneliness and self-reproach had done something towards subduing that proud nature; but they had not proved enough, and it was not till a strange day, nearly a month ago now, that Miss Wynton had been brought face to face with pressing realities.

She would never forget that evening when she had been startled by Andrew Valender's abrupt entrance far later than his wont, and the peculiar though suppressed excitement of his whole appearance. He had been looking far from well of late; but now the intense pallor of his face, and the trembling of his hand as he touched her own, filled her with sudden alarm. But he put aside her eager queries with a word.

"Nobody is ill," he said, "and nothing is wrong, except, indeed, the revelation of myself in my true colours—which is enough, God knows."

"Andrew, what *can* you mean?" asked his old friend, in

real dismay; for he had sunk into a chair as he spoke, a
covered his face with his hands. And the moments w
torturous in their suspense till he looked up again.

She was standing at his side, quivering with agitation
great as his own. Recovering himself, he placed her in
chair from which he had just risen, and stood looking do
upon her with forced calmness, as though he had set him
to a task that should be carried through, whatever the ef
it cost.

"I have just run against Jack Holmes," he began; "a
he has told me a strange tale. The lad has been with
friends, assisting at such a bit of family history as——"

He broke off suddenly, and, turning away, paced the l
drawing-room more than once before pausing again beside
chair, his lips trembling in spite of his utmost efforts of s
control.

"I believe in goodness at last," he said, with a stran
deep breath that was almost a sob. "There was one w
always told me I did even then—in those long-ago da
But she was wrong. I half thought I did myself, but I to
and trifled with such convictions till the test came, and the
you know how I played the man."

Again came the abrupt pause, and the monotonous wa
and Miss Wynton seemed unable to ask any question,
could only wait, with a sense of heart-sinking, for furt
enlightenment.

"It makes a man very happy," he went on, with a bi
smile, "to awake to a sense of what he has lost, and to f
all the work has been done without help of his—to aw
to the fact that, while he has speculated and debated, oth
have stepped in and won the day! It is a fitting reward.
it is something to know that we still have God's saints u
earth, even in these late days."

"But you do not tell me what has happened, Andrew," s
Miss Wynton, at last.

"*This* has happened," he answered suddenly and abruptly. "While you and I have been blenching at the name of a convict, and seeing how we could best forget his very existence, Althea's weak woman-hands and those of her brother have pulled him out of the slough, and started him on a new career. Think—only think—while I have been debating with myself between whiles, whether I could stoop to such a connection, and preferring to let things go on rather than face the worst, that noble girl has been toiling for five years for another's redemption, leaving her own future to fare as it would! This is the woman you and I were to be ashamed of, forsooth! Oh, Cousin Felicitas," he added, with a quick change of manner, "you have cared for me all my life, and I will not reproach you, if I can help it! But, if only you had loved me a little more or a little less, I might have been a different man to-day!"

It was not a cheering word to hear, so near the end of a long life, and no wonder that the old heart sank lower yet than before.

With a desperate effort she faltered, "You will go back to her then, Andrew?"

He almost laughed. "Ah! that is it!" he cried. "That is my fitting part to play! Go back, and say I graciously incline to take up what I threw away five years ago, now the way is smoothed and things are made easy, and she has proved herself deserving of the honour! She had a fine spirit in the old days, I remember—how her great eyes will blaze upon me now! Nevertheless, you are right: it is that I came to-night to tell you openly, for I am resolved to drink the cup of humiliation to the very dregs."

"You are too hard upon yourself, Andrew," was the sorrowful rejoinder. "You forget that you, too, have made sacrifices——"

But he cut her short. "Good night, dear cousin," he said quietly, but without his usual caress: "good night, and

...that kept him
had been coming on fo
examination: no doubt tl
close confinement, had m
was nothing serious the ma
the mountains, would put
he must pull along quietly,

Nevertheless, now, at th
mountains were apparently
patient certainly took things
not seem to progress. Th
their full length on the gre
to which he had been move
growing a little disheartened
rather, she began to half-susp

There was only one pers
down, sad-faced woman, who
favourite's couch, and detecte
in his glance, whenever his he
standing there.

She had the key to the brok
scious days; she knew that nc
only the prostration

uneasy longing, till he should give her the chance to speak; who, when his glance fell upon her at last, and his head was turned wearily away as if to avoid remark, came deprecatingly forward, and laid a trembling hand upon his own, with a murmur of fond inquiry?

"Andrew," she began, with strange wistfulness, "you must not despise me—you, who are all I have. You shall live your own life if you will not keep me quite shut out. You shall go to Harington if you will, as soon as sufficient strength returns, and—and—oh, Andrew! it is all right! Do you understand? I saw Mr. Venables two whole years ago—you are in your own old place once more! And when you go to Harington you will not go empty-handed."

She would not wait to see the effect of her words; and Phelps, coming up the staircase at the moment, caught sight of her mistress hurrying from the sick-room with her handkerchief to her eyes, and heard a sound of low restrained sobbing, as the door closed.

But Miss Wynton's heart was easier from that moment.

"I am expecting my niece in a day or two," she said quietly to the servants, later on, that evening. "Let her room be prepared, but I would rather Mr. Valender first heard of her arrival from myself. He is, at present, so weak that the least thing agitates him."

Althea had no doubt of her welcome on this, her third visit to Elm-leigh, and the change in Miss Felicia impressed her, on the very threshold. Their positions seemed reversed, and it was the stately old lady who now betrayed the greatest hesitation; and, towards the end of lunch, it increased to a pitch of downright nervousness, till conversation almost came to a dead-lock.

Althea had begun mournfully to wonder how she would survive a week's ordeal of this nature, and had risen on the first opportunity with a return of her old impetuous haste, pushing back her chair with a suppressed sigh of relief.

"Come, Aunt Felicia," she began, with a desperate effo to break the ice, "come out with me, before the air gets chi I will fetch your hood, and you shall take me round the o familiar walks I remember so well."

But Miss Felicia had some unaccountable errand upstai and grew so nervous and peculiar, that Althea began to thi that long solitude was weakening her faculties, so turned last for a brief ramble alone. After all, it was much nicer s she felt instinctively. What would Miss Felicia know of t secrets the flowers distilled—of the message of the elms— the story of her youth embalmed within those walls, such Althea always felt? It was opening, page by page, before h once again, as she trod the grassy walks—as she rested dreami in the little alcove—as she lingered beside her favourite ros bush before going in, and memory dwelt on a late "goo night" upon that very spot, so long ago.

The intervening five years seemed slipping away; the li of resolute labour and activity was giving place to the life dreams; nay, it seemed to Althea, just then, that the orga and the class-room, and the prison-gates were all part of strange dream, and that the real awakening was in the o sweet garden, as the home-reared girl! Everything helped t idea. The rose breath, the quiet seclusion, the face that her vivid fancy was even now regarding her from that upp window—the face that no memory had ever before made clear. Althea stood for a minute petrified—amazed. Cou mere fancy play upon her to such an extent as this? T next minute—dream or no dream—she obeyed a voicele call, and passing swiftly up the staircase, met Miss Wynton the head; and asked, brokenly—

"Aunt Felicia—is it—— Oh, tell me what to do!"

But the old lady only waved her hand in passing, with tearful smile. "Go in there, child," was all she could say. B there was no need for more. It was a full hour before she turned, and any trepidation as to the results of the interview h

long passed away; nevertheless she drew a breath of unfeigned relief as she paused on the threshold in the deepening dusk.

Everything was confused and indistinct, but as Althea rose from her low seat beside the couch, and came forward towards the light let in by the opening door, even dim eyes could not fail to see the sunny brightness of the face, though the shadow of recent tears lay close behind.

"Is she altered, Andrew?" asked the elder woman, with a new touch of tenderness in her voice, as she laid her hand on her niece's shoulder.

She was somewhat taken aback by the reply that came from the shadowy corner occupied by the patient's couch.

"My verdict must be reserved," he said calmly. "In this uncertain light one sees everything under more or less of a glamour. I was taught long ago to wait and see if subjects will 'bear the daylight.'"

So coolly was this delivered, that even Althea was for the moment startled. Could this be the man that, half an hour ago, she could hardly restrain from kneeling at her feet, and asking with a passionate humility for the forgiveness he felt he so ill deserved—to whose side, to check the flow of hard names by which he had called himself, she had crept closely, and laid her head upon his cushions, and asked, with streaming tears, the old question he had put to her so long ago, "Is there no such thing as forgiveness—if, indeed, I have anything to forgive?"

But the sudden change in his manner was only natural after the first astonishment; and old memories came leaping back afresh, so that Althea recovered herself speedily.

"I think, Aunt Felicia," she said, with a slight elevation of her head and of the glow in her cheeks, "that natures like Mr. Valender's improve with some slight exertion. I will leave him now; and to-morrow, if he desires a little sensible conversation, I believe he will be able to come downstairs for it without harm to himself."

She proved correct. Althea was half through a letter
her father in the summer-house next morning, when she w
startled to see that her advice had been taken too literal
and that the invalid seemed likely to dispense with a nu
henceforward.

"I could not resist the conversation I was promised,"
said, in answer to her shocked exclamation, as she spru
forward to assist him. "One cannot get rational discou
every day, and I remember it used to be a great point w
you. Oh, Althie!" he cried, dropping his bantering tone,
with a deep sigh of relief he sank upon the rustic seat a
drew her close, "half the night through I have been wonderi
how I could ever have spared my treasure—how I could ha
forfeited five whole years of blessedness that might have be
mine!"

Althea's heart swelled strangely. Her quick ears caught
last the note for which they had yearned in those old days
heard now for the first time; and it seemed to her at th
moment that the price of five years was small indeed for su
a joy as this.

"Perhaps they are not wasted years," she answered low,
she laid her cheek against his arm in the old caressing wa
"It seems to me that love, true love, must strike its roots ve
deeply if it has to last into eternity. Oh, Andrew, I thi
even a whole life would not be too long to get this by hea
as you and I have it now!—as I know, for the first time, w
have it now."

She had lifted her head again in her earnestness, and th
changing face, so near his own, with its lustrous eyes sparkli
through tears, seemed waiting for a confirmation of her word
He stroked it gently, and made it rest again in its old fashio

"How do you know that?" he asked in a tone as low
her own.

"I know it—*because* I know it," she replied, simpl
"All along I missed something, and trembled even when yo

said all was right. On this very spot, do you remember how you laughed at me, and declared you must pass an examination before you could convince me? And then, afterwards, you found you did not love me well enough, and that I was right. I do not blame you, dearest," she added quickly, as a shadow of pain crossed his face: "it was not your fault—I said so, all along. It was that we were not ready for each other, and that until that time came we were far better apart. Some people learn life's lessons best side by side, and some have to be prepared for them beforehand in lonely paths; but oh! if the good God takes such pains to train us for joy in this life, He must have a wonderful hereafter in store! I love to think that even the meanest life, and the one that misses love altogether, is in training for that."

"My blessed little Mrs. More!"

The words were uttered in a sort of hushed delight, and with no banter in them, as his arm tightened round her; and Althea no longer shrank from the name, or feared to show her deepest feelings to the man she loved.

"God grant I may never disappoint her," he went on, "however short I may fall of her ideal. But oh, Althea! though I am no hero, such as you deserve, I love you—I *love* you! Who knows but you may even yet make me what you will?"

"I have given up heroes long ago," she answered. "At least, I should be afraid to begin life with one, as I could never keep pace with him. I have found what I want. Oh! Andrew, *how* my mother loved you! What faith she had in you! How she bade me to hope and love! And to-day I can face the future with an untroubled heart."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE OLD BROCADE AGAIN.

"Not perfect, nay, but full of tender wants;
No angel, but a dearer being."

The Princess.

BUT if Mr. Valender was half afraid, at first, that he wa
too far behind, he soon took heart of grace, for it was not
before Althea's strictly human side betrayed itself in
ways. People who keep the level road and the ordinary
may be trusted to retain a tolerably secure footing, but our
Althea, with her rapturous flights and her glimpses of ec
would probably stumble and fall to the last day of her exist

Those moments of rapture, indeed, were often the precu
of sorrow and depression, as she too often discovered, an
had not done yet with the "little things."

She was far less in awe of her aunt than she used t
and the two were friends in the main, but twenty-four
were sufficient to show that their natures were antagoi
and that in a hundred points they would have to agr
differ.

Althea's closely-filled time and many and varied dut
the past, now made the long hours of leisure posi
wearisome to her, and she found it almost impossible
still so long without occupation. Springing up at
times to secure the veriest trifle to save her from yaw

she often perceived a shadow cross Miss Wynton's face, but whether at the action or the manner, she could not tell.

But nothing transpired till one unlucky day when Mr. Valender, being closely occupied with his correspondence elsewhere, the long afternoon was entirely taken up with visitors, and with a style of conversation in which Althea did not shine—in which, alas! she did not even do her best. So, finding Mrs. Blakeney's chit-chat almost as depressing as ever, Althea found her attention wandering, and the old longing to escape filling her soul. She knew that was impossible; but her face, withdrawn from interest, grew gradually more shadowy, and at last she was left almost to herself, silent and *distraite*, till a pointed remark from her hostess roused her, to find Mrs. Blakeney was grieving over one of her "laddies," whose recent matrimonial engagement had disappointed his friends.

"Only to think, my dear, a woman without money, without connections—without even youth; for I believe she is some years his senior! I say it is selfishness on her part—pure selfishness, to take him! She has only her handsome face to recommend her, and where will that be in a few years' time, I should like to know? For we all know how women who have passed their prime begin to fade—every woman does; and so has she, for they tell me she is nothing to what she was at twenty; and by-and-by, when——"

"Do they love one another?" asked a voice at her elbow, striking suddenly into the stream of talk with an earnestness that only half concealed the tinge of bitterness in the tone.

The old lady started and turned. She had given up Miss Holmes as a bad listener, and the question perplexed her somewhat.

"My dear," she said, with a little laugh, "you are a subscriber to Mudie's, I can see. But ideas of that sort don't stand the wear and tear of everyday life. When people have outlived their youth, they want something rather more substantial than romance, to avoid future disappointment."

Her listener flinched in an instant, as if something had s her, and one of those sudden shadows passed over her leaving it hard and reserved. She had taken Mrs. Blake words too literally, and, with her old foolish sensitive had fancied they pointed to herself! Instead of fe only tired and uninterested, her heart sank with a new bitter pain. Was *she* one of these fading women? She never thought of it before; but it came flashing upon like a terrible conviction. She remembered her fat laments over her, even in early days; and though she had too absorbed in work since then to think much about appearance, it dawned upon her now, with a new mea that she **was not the Althea of old.**

It was a dreary thought, and, full of this new trouble, Al started up as the door closed on the last visitor, when Wynton's voice checked her precipitate flight.

"My dear Althea," she began, "you are too sensible to exception to what I want to say. But you must really with me—you are not a child now, you know."

"No, indeed, Aunt Felicia! Of that I am well assured

"Try, then, to cultivate those little courtesies that s intercourse demands. I have always noticed a great lac repose in your manner, and those sudden movements tried me sorely; still that is nothing, compared with embarrassing conduct with visitors. Lack of attention mark of positive discourtesy, and you were quite lef yourself at last, this afternoon, on that account. Don't see, my dear, that, now you are about to enter a diffe sphere, it will be really necessary to take some pains t yourself for it."

Althea flushed scarlet, and the demon of pride took hol her forthwith.

"In other words, Aunt Felicia," she broke forth, " mean that the ill-breeding that would do well enough Castle Street, will have to be corrected in the Elm-

drawing-room. But you must excuse my differing from you. My mother taught me that *home* is the place for truest breeding. And, therefore the discourtesy you speak of, and which I fully admit, is not really worse here than it is at home."

"I cannot enter into those fine-drawn distinctions," replied Miss Wynton, drawing herself up with a marked change of manner. "All I maintain is, that society imposes certain regulations, and that every woman is bound to contribute her share to the general pleasure, and to avoid anything that will embarrass or give pain. A well-bred woman will always find a way to do this. Instinct alone will teach her so much."

"I did not know I had embarrassed or given any one pain," was the quick rejoinder; for the sense of pain *received* was obliterating all else at the moment.

"That is what I say—you have need to acquire the social instinct," said the elder woman, promptly. "You did not see Mr. Stanway's embarrassment when you blurted out about your salary for organ lessons in such a marked and sudden manner, when there was not the least necessity either. I felt, rather than saw, how his eye fell upon me, to see whether I heard the conversation."

Althea's astonishment kept her silent half a minute; and there was a ring of contempt in her voice, when she found it once again.

"There was *every* necessity for it, Aunt Felicia. When our talk drifted to that subject, he was especially interested in my work at Overton; because he is wanting help for the little organ here. 'If he could only find a lady equally ready to give her time, voluntarily, to so good a cause,' he began. And then what course was open to me, but to tell him mine were not voluntary services? Oh, Aunt Felicia, Elm-leigh ideas are very refined; but they are a little behind the age, and people are beginning to have too much sense to shrink from receiving a fair day's wages for a fair day's work."

"I suppose you wilfully misunderstand," was the displeased

reply. "But when there are so many other subject conversation, I should, under the peculiar circumsta prefer the *organ* being left out of remark. Even truth not be aggressive."

And, with a touch of her former stateliness, Miss W left the room by one door just as Mr. Valender entere another, with the pile of letters and papers he had preparing for post.

"Well, Althea, how has the afternoon gone?" he a throwing them down wearily on a side table. But, for not waiting for a reply, went on, "Is there any tea lef am dead tired with so much writing. I thought I was h than I am."

Althea made the tea he asked for, and carried it t settee on which he had thrown himself, but without the caress. A strange soreness and sense of humiliation oppressing her, and making it impossible to be her na self just then.

"Come and talk to me a little while. Sit down here, cl he said, attempting to draw her beside him. "I want to how you and Mrs. Blakeney have threshed out your ideas

"I cannot stay, really, Andrew. Aunt Felicia has al gone upstairs, and I must hasten to make a little chan my dress. Stay quietly here, and rest till the bell rings."

He looked wistful suddenly. "May I ask a favour, Alt I want you to do more than make a little change. Giv a great pleasure, and look your very best to-night. I am enough now to appreciate it."

It seemed like the last straw to poor Althea. "I ha evening gowns, Andrew, if you mean that," she said, in a constrained tone, as she turned aside to hide the flus words had called up. "I have had no time or money to of such things lately; it has been very sober reality wit So I am afraid you must put up with a dowdy, the short I am here."

"My dearest," he cried, starting up in contrition, and not noticing the last words of her remark, "you have indeed been too engrossed to think of self in any shape or form. But, Althea,"—as the bell clanged out at this point,—"give me a great treat, and come down in the old brocade. It would be delightful to see you in that once again."

But she only shook her head and hurried away, with a strange pain still at her heart. The old brocade, indeed! That lovely old gown in which a piece of her youth seemed embalmed! Wear it to-night, of all times, when she had just been told she was a fading woman, and that she lacked good breeding! Wear it and reveal the ravages of five years to a disappointed lover! No, indeed! Better be an honest dowdy than a guy decked out in borrowed plumes, she said to herself, heaping up bitter epithets, with a choking sense of helplessness; and then stopping suddenly, arrested by the thought of Andrew's tired face.

It was not pleasant to go and borrow a dress of one from whom she had just parted in somewhat strained relations; it was the distinct *un*pleasantness that made Althea lose not a moment in tapping at Miss Wynton's door with her old breathless haste, lest she should change her mind.

"Aunt Felicia, that silly boy wants to make a simpleton of me. It is a sick man's whim, I suppose. Do you mind? May Phelps reach me your old primrose brocade?"

The old lady smiled faintly, and gave the order. She evidently regarded it as a tendering of the olive branch. But Phelps was so slow in her movements that, when Althea at last secured her unwelcome prize, she almost plunged into it, so as to be in time; then, not even daring to cast a glance at her own reflection, lest she should be horrified at results, sped downstairs with an inward groan, feeling like a daw in peacock's feathers. Ruffled feathers, too, that was the worst of it. Something constrained and pre-occupied in her manner checked Andrew's glowing smile on her entrance, and damped his

pleasure—he hardly knew how or why; while Althea's sensations certainly did not improve with the discovery course it was all just as she had feared, and Andrew——

Well, the melancholy meal was over at last, and Valender was calling her for a stroll; out there in the breathing was easier, from however sad a heart.

"Miss Felicia and I had a good long talk this mor Althie," he began, "and we decided that, with your gra leave, everything should be arranged while the Conways England; and that we need not wait longer than the spring for our wedding. So I want you to go over the with me to-morrow, and decide about alterations; for C Felicitas is as gentle as a lamb, and says they shall b about directly Mrs. Conway has paid her first visit here."

Althea gasped for breath. "But you surely don't mea are to live at Elm-leigh—with Aunt Felicia?" she cried.

It was Mr. Valender's turn to be astonished now. "W would you have us live, I wonder?" he asked qu "Would you rather it were with my mother, or in my si household, or in my Uncle Valender's bachelor abode? you know that, except Elm-leigh, I have no home to whi take my wife. And Miss Wynton being your own mo sister, I should have thought it the most natural thing, a so distinctly wishes it, for us to make our home here."

Althea did not answer at first. Her heart was beating fast, and her preoccupied fingers were pulling a rose pieces, petal by petal, till they were taken in a firm clasp stopped their destructive play.

"Say, Althea—is it not the most natural thing?"

"Possibly," she answered, with a determination to avoi eyes that were so manifestly seeking her own. "But na as it may be, it is not my idea of a home."

"Nor mine," he answered quickly. "But you know Wynton's loneliness, and her failing health. And I think, all her goodness to me, it would be nicer not to wait as th

her death would be a gain to us. And in this wide old house there would be room to——"

"To live apart," broke in Althea, promptly. "Because I will never consent to share a home as a new comer and an intruder! I have my own theories of what home should be, and were it but in a nutshell, they shall be carried out! I will have a home where I can speak my mind, and live my life in my own poor untutored way! I will have a home where my people shall be free to come as they will—where my dear old father shall strum and thrum to his heart's content as he has ever used—where Edmund and Jack shall feel there is always a welcome waiting for them, whenever they can spare time to take it—where——"

She stopped for sheer lack of breath; and the words had come tumbling out in such hot haste, and with such impetuous decision, that Mr. Valender, amused though he was, was a little nettled besides.

"Pretty well, that!" he remarked. "Our *ménage* bids fair to have uncertain limits, it seems. I suppose the indispensable What's-her-name must likewise not be left out of the list—to say nothing of any pet dogs, or parrots, or monkeys that would condescend to honour us with their presence. But it seems to me, madam, you forget you are not married yet! You will have this and you will have that, forsooth! Supposing I should change my mind?"

Althea flung up her head, and flashed upon him a swift answer.

"Exactly, sir. And I am thinking at this moment of the little house in Harington. It has always softened its most bitter truths—it has never been ashamed of me. I will go back to my dear old father."

She turned in a blind, desperate way, as if to go that very moment; and Andrew's laughing voice fell strangely on her ears, as his arms came round her in a sort of rapture.

"It is a breath of the old days!" he cried. "How your eyes leaped out upon me for daring to tease you so! It was

audacious, I grant, but it was irresistible, at the mom
That old dress always seems to set you to music; to-nig
was like wild tarantella, too spirited to last. Oh, Alt
by-and-by we will play at quarrelling, just now and t
for a change, but not often; it is too dangerous a ga
But that little explosion has cleared the air, and made
way for me to tell you what I have been thinking all alon
how *lovely* you have grown!"

His companion glanced up at him a moment with w
open, wondering eyes; and the lips that had quivered
rebellious pride, now found it hard to articulate, for she
fancied he was mocking her.

"Yes, *lovely*," he repeated, emphatically. "Why do
look so incredulous, as if you doubted my power of visi
For it is distinctly true. Even in old times your face ha
nameless charm for me; but it has gained new grace someh
in these sorrowful years. What is it, child?"

For the life of her she could not have told him, eve
she had known. She could only let her face fall sudde
and sob as if she were indeed the child he so playfully ca
her: for relief and shame and contrition were strugg
together; past repression, and the fierce resentment of the
last miserable hours was breaking up in a repentance as
as it was humble.

No, she could not tell him—not even when the storm
over, and life was growing again the beautiful thing it
been two days ago.

"Do not ask me," she pleaded. "I am so ashamed,
I am punished enough. Some day you shall hear all ab
it, and how rude and miserable I have been, but not n
But oh, Andrew, when I begin to think I am gaining a
in the right direction, there comes another shameful fall,
as it has been all my life, till I am tempted sometime
despair! Do you remember poor Christina Rossetti ask
'Does the road wind uphill all the way?'"

"I don't exactly recall it," was the reply, with a tender, half-amused smile into the tearful face. "I am not quite so much at home with the poets as you, you know. But, as to the ups and downs, we shall perhaps get on better together than if I were a hero, or you an angel. And if the road does wind uphill—well, dear, we will face the toilsome ascent hand-in-hand."

* * * * * *

We must leave them only at the starting-point of this new journey, in the chancel of the old church at Harington, one early April day.

Miss Felicia had much wanted the simple wedding to be at Elm-leigh; but Althea had determined otherwise, and said a very decided "*No.*" She had many reasons for this; not the least the desire that Mr. Thorpe should befriend her in joy as he had once done in sorrow. And Andrew had seconded the choice at once, though he gave no reasons for so doing. Most of that little party, however, could guess them without asking—those who had known his sense of shame over past weakness; he could not be satisfied to claim his wife except from the place he had once shunned. But decided as Althea had been on one or two points, perhaps no bride was ever more easily managed in the main, for she was as willing to give up to her cousin's judgment as Louise was to take the whole supervision, and her help had been invaluable.

"Do see after her a little," Andrew had hinted, anxiously, to Mrs. Conway, remembering Althea's unlucky *début* as a bridesmaid years before. "She has not much idea how to take care of herself; she shines best in other people's behalf."

To which Louise had responded, with a most reassuring little smile, "that he might leave it all to her; she was the responsible person."

And so she was; for planning and working for Althea had occupied a large share of Mrs. Conway's leisure that winter, even sometimes encroaching on *Pacha's* claims, and now, as

she sat by her husband's side in the old church, her
blue eyes growing dim with sympathetic tears, she felt
satisfied, and, but for the lack of one bright presence, per
happy.

Althea, too, was happy—trustfully, restfully, earnestly h
though in her own peculiar way of taking life. A
mother had often said, she would never take it too easily
second Althea was far from rushing to the point, as th
had done, and expecting a Paradise on earth: she had ha
many lessons in sober walking. Among the lesser evil
instance, it would not be Paradise to go and live with
Felicia—softened though she was: the most modest ho
the world would have been more to her mind, if share
Andrew alone; but she saw as he did that it was the
way, and consoled herself with the thought of the whole
of the house that had been specially prepared, and plac
her entire disposal.

And a want—closer and nearer than all other—wa
longing for her mother on that strange and wonderful mo
—at the parting of the ways; and, mingled with this, the
ing over those who had formed a part of her whole life hit

The old home history seemed touched and sanctified
to its minutest details—just as on that day when the m
had been taken to her rest; and now, as Althea fel
father's arm tremble as he led her to her place, she knew
the same feeling was paramount with him. She press
closer with her answering touch, and as her eyes met Edm
it seemed for a moment almost like desertion—this
herself away; till Andrew came forward to claim her, an
felt, rather than saw, the light in his eyes.

Was it fancy, or did Mr. Thorpe's hand really ling
the act of blessing, with something in the touch that dis
Althea's lingering half regrets, and made her face so ra
as she turned away on her husband's arm? Any way the
was over—even the pain of leaving beloved ones; and jo

reflected in every answering face. In Jack's, who had been studying the marriage service with an attention that had hinted much for his own, not-distant future—in grave old Miss Horton's, who leaned forward to smile emphatically upon the pair as they passed her pew—upon those of the six young girls (representatives of Althea's class) who stepped before her suddenly to scatter flowers in her path—even in Kitty's, who up to now had taken a dolorous view of it all, but who had caught the general sunshine, and whose honest face was beaming through its tears in the retired corner she had occupied throughout. Althea only missed her father's face among the rest. He had slipped away to the organ chamber immediately on leaving the vestry, and his full heart was finding expression in its most natural way. Perhaps no bride had ever heard so much in Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" as Althea did, for it suggested tender associations of the life behind, as well as hope for the future; and she lingered till the last chords ended before turning away.

> "They leave the porch, they pass the grave
> That has to-day its sunny side."

And in that sunshine we will leave them to each other.

THE END.

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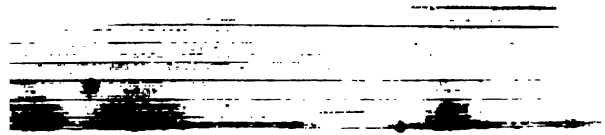

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